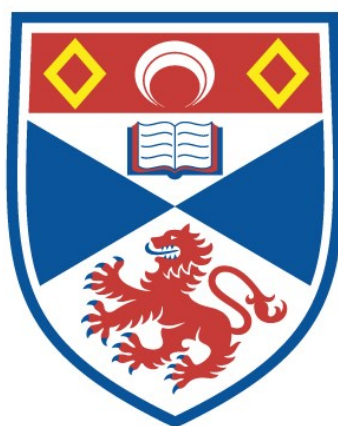


'THE WAY THINGS TRULY ARE' : THE METHODOLOGY AND RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY OF ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON

Cherith Fee Nordling

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
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of Elizabeth A. Johnson**

Submitted by
Cherith Fee Nordling
to the
University of St. Andrews
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine and critique the transcendental feminist methodology and Trinitarian theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson. We will focus on four central, recurring themes that emerge out of her corpus, paying particular attention to how she assimilates these in *She Who Is*. They are: Johnson's feminist methodology and epistemology, her transcendental anthropology and epistemology, her panentheistic, relational ontology and her feminist 'Trinitarian' God-talk.

The thesis will consist of four chapters, which will focus on these four main themes, and a conclusion. Chapter one will look specifically at the Johnson's modern, Catholic reformist feminist methodology and epistemology, which prioritise both the category of experience and the ontological principle of relation. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of a few feminists who have defined their theological positions in direct opposition to Barth's view of Trinitarian revelation and language, and compare them to Johnson. Chapter Two will deal specifically with Johnson's embrace of Karl Rahner's transcendental metaphysics and her attempt to integrate this anthropology and ontological epistemology with feminist anthropology and epistemology. We will also highlight the various 'dilemmas of difference' Johnson faces in her use of conflicting appeals to experience.

Chapter Three will analyse and critique her panentheistic, relational ontology with specific attention paid to her re-schematization of traditional Trinitarian theology and Christology. Barth's theology is used in part to critique Johnson's assertions at this point. In Chapter Four, we analyse Johnson's 'analogical' and 'symbolic' approach to God-talk to determine whether it is safeguarded from univocity, as she intends. We also raise the question of whether she is kept from the potential equivocity that threatens her agnostic approach. In conclusion, we will summarise our response to the naturally emerging questions of the thesis, assess Johnson's approach overall and raise whatever questions we believe still remain.

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Date 7 Nov 03

Signature of candidate _____

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Introduction

I. *Thesis Concerns and Justification*

This thesis examines and critiques the transcendental feminist methodology and Trinitarian theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J.. In so doing, we acknowledge from the outset that there are both advantages and disadvantages in writing a dissertation on the work of a living theologian, due to the fact that her theology is still in a state of flux.

The primary justification for this study comes from the tremendous degree of influence that Johnson has had on Western (particularly North American) contemporary Roman Catholic theology and Christian feminist theology over the past twenty years. This is due in no small part to the significant body of literature she has produced.¹ Recently described as 'the leading feminist voice on the contemporary theological scene',² she is one of the most erudite and influential representatives of 'Catholic, liberation, feminist reformism' (hereinafter generally referred to as 'Catholic feminist reformism'). A respected scholar, teacher and leader both within the academy and the Catholic religious community,³ Johnson is considered a staunch member of the 'loyal

¹ Most of Johnson's works will appear in footnotes throughout the thesis in addition to the bibliography. She has written substantively on the doctrine of God, symbolic language, and christology. Her other works include writings on mariology, women and the Church, pneumatology, cosmology and eco-feminism, eschatology and community.

² This cite is from the promotional cover of *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, ed. Phyllis Zagano and Terence W. Tilley (New York: Crossroads, 1999). This book provides a complete bibliography of her academic and popular writings, speeches, audiotapes and book reviews through 1999. Johnson, who has received numerous awards for her books and articles, has also served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

³ In *Introducing Contemporary Theologies: The What and the Who of Theology Today* (Australia: E.G. Dwyer, 1997), Neil Ormerod states, 'Johnson would hardly strike one as a radical figure. She is a Catholic nun working in a well-reputed Catholic university. Moreover, her books and articles reflect a profound, if critical, respect for Catholic tradition. There is no knee-jerk rejection of figures from the past, such as Augustine and Aquinas, because of their obvious patriarchal bias. Rather there is a critical retrieval of their positive insights, and the active utilization of these insights within a developing feminist perspective. Still her work is deeply unsettling in the biases she uncovers and the strategies she develops to overcome them' (185).

opposition'.⁴ In other words, she seeks to remain within the Roman Catholic tradition while calling for its reform in the particular light of liberation feminism and its critique of ecclesial/social sexism and patriarchal, religious 'idolatry'.

The principle form of 'idolatry' Johnson has worked to reform has been the Church's doctrine of and language for the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This 'literal' view is judged to be oppressive, both in terms of its theistic understanding of the divine-world relation – i.e., one that considers God to be wholly distinct from and immanently, relationally independent of the world in Triune aseity – and its inherent attribution of male 'gender' to God. Catholic patriarchy allegedly promotes a classical 'theistic' view of God as disengaged from the social concerns of the oppressed, the ecological concerns of creation and unjust human relationships. This view of God fails to uphold the feminist values of equality, reciprocity and mutuality which she contends are essential to women's experience and to the very nature of God. Hence traditional Christian doctrine and language for the Trinity is considered to function negatively toward creation *and God*.

Johnson's first theological 'battles' were waged primarily in the arena of Christology as she assessed the implications of Jesus' humanity for women. Since then, she has worked to reconstruct the doctrine of God *in toto*. The result is her major treatise, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*,⁵ in which she deals

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson positively uses this term to refer to Johnson and others who have stayed in the Church while 'negotiating the tensions between Christian faith and feminist commitment'. See "What Are They Saying About God? – Something Fundamental is Afoot," *Commonweal* (January 1993): 17-22, 17.

⁵ (New York: Crossroads, 1992). This book will hereafter be abbreviated *SWI*. For a selection of critical reviews of this work, see Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Braiding a New Footbridge: Christian Wisdom, Classic and Feminist," *Christian Century* (November 17-24, 1993): 1159-1162; Cynthia L. Rigby, a review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Koinonia* 5 (Fall 1993): 255-59; Mary Aquin O'Neill and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, a review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Religious Studies Review* 21 (January

with feminist theological anthropology, Trinitarian panentheism and God-talk. Here she argues that the feminist reformist agenda is taking place at a critical, historical juncture between traditional Christian doctrine and, after two centuries of development, 'human experience' as *the* theological *a priori*.⁶ Thus 'women's search for less inadequate ways of speaking about God today intersects with other theological efforts to rethink the inherited doctrine of God, which itself has already been in a crisis of reformation for some time'.⁷

Hence, assuming the necessary 'reformation' of Christian doctrine 'from below', Johnson asks 'what is the right way to speak about God?'⁸ In feminist terms, 'what is a proper view of the God-world relation, and accompanying God-talk, that takes women's relational experience into account as source and norm?' Hanging in the balance is not only the right re-ordering of relationships but the future of the Christian faith: 'The intellectual vitality of the feminist theological agenda is matched and even outpaced by its existential importance. What is at stake is ... indeed the very viability of the Christian tradition for present and coming generations'.⁹

Distinction in Relation

Johnson's goal as a Christian feminist theologian is to articulate a theology of divine-cosmic relationality, which she does in the form of a relational ontology expressed

1995): 19-25; Sonya Quitslund, a review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 31 (Winter-Spring 1994): 190-92; Mary E. Hines, Mary Rose D'Angelo and John Carmody, "Three Perspectives," a symposium review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Horizons* 20 (Fall 1993): 339-344.

⁶ *SWI*, 15, 19.

⁷ *SWI*, 19 (emphasis added).

⁸ *SWI*, 18. In "The Right Way to Speak About God: Pannenberg on Analogy," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673-692, Johnson opens by citing Pannenberg: "A crucial, if not *the* most basic question of theology is the question about the right way to speak of God." From Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 211.

⁹ *SWI*, 15.

through female 'Trinitarian' metaphors. She offers her relational ontology through the re-schematisation of aspects of Christian doctrine which she contends maintain too radical a distinction between God and human – particularly women's – relational experience. Her earliest writings, which raise the question of God and God-talk from experience, set out her position in opposition to that of Karl Barth – precisely because she considers Barth to maintain too radical a distinction at this point.

In Catholic feminist reformism, God's relation to humanity and to creation at large, and *vice versa*, is governed by the feminist *a priori* of mutual interrelatedness. The universal structure of 'relational being' not only prescribes the conditions for the divine-human relation, but also serves as a predefined, *a priori* category of human knowing. Hence Johnson's theology relies on the assumption that we can know God more or less directly, albeit symbolically, through experience as transcendental experience of 'the divine'.

Moreover, this ontological priority of relation, which constitutes the heart of divine reality, is considered to be essential to women's relational experience.¹⁰ Thus women have unique epistemic access to divine relationality and experiential access to its 'true' creaturely form and content. Generally, this ontological assumption requires the rejection of any kind of traditional theism that upholds God as 'wholly other' in free (unnecessary) asymmetrical relation to creation. Certain feminists, including Johnson, generally attribute this theistic view to Karl Barth. They consider Barth's theology to be a

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 32 and passim. This presupposition is not only basic to Catholic feminism but also to pragmatic feminism (Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: feminism, language, God* [New York: Crossroads, 1989]), lesbian feminism (Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: a theology of mutual relation* [New York: University Press of America, 1980]), process feminism (Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Divine Power: A Study of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986]), and poststructuralist feminism (Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994]).

reactionary, conservative revivification of pre-modern thought, one which fails to take seriously either human experience or a non-oppressive, relational view of God.¹¹

Nevertheless, Johnson recognises that God's distinction from the world is a priority in the Christian tradition. Because she intends that her theology be 'recognizable within the contours of Christian faith', she attempts to honour that distinction both in her doctrine of God and her God-talk, which she contends is in agreement with Thomistic analogy. Johnson maintains that the 'divine mystery' of God as 'wholly other' exists in mutually interdependent but also free and asymmetrical relation to the world – and can only be known in and through it. Thus, Johnson recognises the value of Barth's emphasis on God's Triune relation to the world. However, she still considers theology 'from below' to be the only viable expression of the 'truth' of the God-world relation, for it can only be 'known' from human experience. Hence, Johnson believes her theology moves beyond Barth and his concerns. As a feminist she focuses specifically on women's ontological being and experience as source and norm for theological truth in this present age.

¹¹ If feminists have dismissed traditional Christianity and Barth, Linda Woodhead notes that the neo-orthodox tradition 'which continues to take its inspiration from Karl Barth' has *itself* had little engagement with feminist academic theology. See "Feminist Theology – Out of the Ghetto," in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?*, ed. Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 198-206, 199. There are exceptions, however. In Katherine Sonderegger's essay, "Barth and Feminism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 258-273, she discusses the 'marriage' potential between Barth and feminist theology, noting positive examples by American feminists like Serene Jones, Deborah Hunsinger, Ellen Charry, Letty Russell, and we would add, Cynthia Rigby and Sonderegger herself. See Serene Jones, "This God Which is Not One: Irigaray and Barth on the Divine," in *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, ed. C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville and Susan M. Simonatis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 109-141; Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Ch. 1; Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 159ff.; Cynthia Rigby, "The Real Word Really Became Real Flesh: Karl Barth's Contribution to a Feminist Incarnational Christology," Unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Princeton Seminary, 1998. See also Dan Migliore, "Sin and Self-Loss: Karl Barth and the Feminist Critique of Traditional Doctrines of Sin," in *Many Voices, One God Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Water Brueggemann and George Stroup (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 139-154.

Johnson offers a panentheistic, feminist concept of God in mutual interrelation with the world. The result is 'a model of free, reciprocal relation: God in the world and the world in God while each remains radically distinct'.¹² However, 'the absolute difference between Creator and creature is encircled by God who is all in all'.¹³ She believes that this concept upholds divine and human distinction while allowing women to speak of God from their transcendental self-awareness and experience. Thus, her concomitant concern is to develop a form of Trinitarian God-talk to accompany this relational ontology. She describes her efforts as follows:

In *She Who Is* I draw on themes and ideas from Thomas Aquinas to explore a feminist theology of God. ...I also make ontological claims and draw references *about the way things truly are*, but these are not beholden to any complete metaphysical system. They may in truth be compatible with many systems. With regard to the Trinity I play with multiple models, convinced that pushing only one alone inevitably leads to a regrettable univocity in speech about the divine. ...Using an entirely different conceptuality, a contemporary reading of Aquinas with Rahnerian and feminist presuppositions, I have also suggested Trinitarian language with a profoundly relational cast....¹⁴

II. Thesis Aim and Design

This thesis aims to carefully explicate and critique Johnson's relational ontology – which includes her theological anthropology and epistemology, her doctrine of God and her understanding of the divine-human relation. We are particularly interested in how she expresses these in Christological and Trinitarian terms.

The primary, non-feminist influence on Johnson's philosophical and theological assumptions is the transcendental Thomism of Karl Rahner.¹⁵ Johnson explains that she

¹² *SWI*, 231.

¹³ *SWI*, 231.

¹⁴ "Forging Theology: A Conversation With Colleagues," in *Things New and Old* (see n. 2) 106-107 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Rahner is the principle theologian of transcendental Thomism (which assimilates both Kant and Hegel) in the twentieth century. Given his profound influence on contemporary Catholic theology, he has been likened on the one hand to a 'twentieth-century Aquinas' by Anne Carr, in "Karl Rahner," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 520. On the

has 'imbibed' Rahner's theology to the point that she takes his assumptions for granted and does not spell them out.¹⁶ Thus, part of the task of this thesis is to trace the elements of Rahner's thought that permeate Johnson's theology and methodology in combination with her feminist, relational approach. Also, in forming our critique, we will occasionally draw in aspects of Karl Barth's theology of Trinitarian revelation and the place of human experience in the knowledge of God. Not only is Barth's theology foundational to Rahner and to Johnson, but Johnson sets up her theology in contrast to a particular reading of Barth. Hence, his theology is used in part to critique her assertions.

In her project of theological 'reformation', Johnson seeks to integrate feminist methodology and epistemology, transcendental Catholic anthropology, epistemology and ontology, *and* a relational metaphysic culled from a variety of sources. Due to the nature of this effort and how she develops her arguments, certain questions naturally emerge. First, are her methodological, philosophical principles and presuppositions internally consistent? Second, are they compatible with her Roman Catholic Christian tradition to which she seeks to remain loyal? And third, are they inherently plausible?

Specifically, what affect do her metaphysical principles have on the divine-human distinction and freedom that she believes is fundamental to Christian faith and God-talk? Finally, can Johnson the feminist avoid the methodological and epistemological pitfalls of modern theology that may inadvertently *support* the theological and social oppression she so deplors?

Given the breadth of Johnson's writings, we are confronted with the difficult task of adequately distilling her thought. We will focus on four central, recurring themes that

other, he has been referred to as 'Catholic theology's Friedrich Schleiermacher', in *A Map of Twentieth-Century Theology*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 277.

¹⁶ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 100-1.

emerge out of her corpus, paying particular attention to how she assimilates these in *She Who Is*. They are: Johnson's feminist methodology and epistemology, her transcendental anthropology and epistemology, her panentheistic, relational ontology and her feminist 'Trinitarian' God-talk.

Thus, the thesis will consist of four chapters, which will focus on these four themes, and a conclusion.

Chapter one will look specifically at Johnson's modern, Catholic reformist feminist methodology and epistemology, which prioritise both the category of experience and the ontological principle of relation. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of a few feminists who have defined their theological positions in direct opposition to Barth's view of Trinitarian revelation and language, and compare them to Johnson.

Chapter Two will deal specifically with Johnson's embrace of Karl Rahner's transcendental metaphysics and her attempt to integrate this anthropology and ontological epistemology with feminist anthropology and epistemology. We will also highlight the various 'dilemmas of difference' Johnson faces in her use of conflicting appeals to experience.

Chapter Three will analyse and critique her panentheistic, relational ontology with specific attention paid to her re-schematization of traditional Trinitarian theology and Christology. Barth's theology is used in part to critique Johnson's assertions at this point.

In Chapter Four, we analyse Johnson's 'analogical' and 'symbolic' approach to God-talk to determine whether it is safeguarded from univocity, as she intends. We also raise the question of whether she is kept from the potential equivocality that threatens her agnostic approach.

In conclusion, we will summarise our response to the naturally emerging questions of the thesis, assess Johnson's approach overall and raise whatever questions we believe still remain.

Scope

There are a couple of things that limitations on space do not allow. First, elements of Johnson's theology deemed extrinsic to the topic will not be covered. For example, although she develops the image and content of her God-symbol from a selective reading and feminist reinterpretation of the Wisdom/*Sophia* tradition, the constraints of our thesis only permit us to highlight her interpretation and briefly point out the already existing critique of such 'exegesis'.¹⁷

Second, the thesis will not consider in depth the extensive feminist debates surrounding gender and identity construction. Rather, we shall limit our discussion to Johnson's feminist use of gender in her epistemology, her explication of 'ideal' humanity and her justification for gendered God-talk.

¹⁷ Suffice to say, a thorough examination of the scholarly literature around the theme of Wisdom is immense and is outside the scope of this thesis. An impressive and wide-ranging survey of the contemporary, rhetorical critical understanding of the Scriptural figure of Wisdom, as well as its Hellenistic contextualization, and contemporary Wisdom Christology, can be found in *SWI*, 288-290n22-53, and Harold Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism: Elizabeth Johnson's Wisdom Christology" in *Theology Today* 52 (October 1995): 332-337. Interestingly, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza considers Johnson to have carefully appropriated and refined Fiorenza's own critical-constructive and theoretical approach of Wisdom Christology. See *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (Tenth Anniversary Addition)* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), xv, xxxvi. For an excellent critique of Johnson's interpretation, see the article by New Testament scholar Karen Jobes, "Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?" in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in the Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and S. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 226-250.

Chapter One:

Re-schematizing Theology 'From Below': Johnson's Reformist Approach

In Elizabeth A. Johnson's exposition of the doctrine of God, which she conceives as 'Trinitarian' and 'panentheistic', and in her corresponding theological speech, she expresses the desire to maintain the distinction and freedom in the God-world relation that she understands to be necessary for a Christian articulation of this relationship. At the same time, she argues that her interpretation of the tradition at this point coincides with the feminist values that promote human worth and distinction in relationships – equality, mutuality and reciprocity. In short, Johnson contends that divine *and* human distinction and freedom are of fundamental, ontological importance and can be sustained within a relationship of mutual coinherence. This thesis seeks to examine Johnson's relational ontology, her methodological presuppositions and her feminist God-talk to see what implication they have for her commitment to maintaining a radical distinction between God and the world that honours personal difference and freedom in continuity with the Christian tradition.

The purpose of this first chapter is to set forth, and offer a critique of, Johnson's particular philosophical and methodological context – 'Catholic reformist feminism' (or 'Catholic reformism') – out of which she attempts to speak of the God-world relation. The focus will be primarily on Catholic reformism's characteristically modern shift away from the traditional view of revelation 'from above' as articulated boldly in the last century by Karl Barth, where the Christian God makes Godself personally known to

humanity through faith. In its place Johnson and her colleagues have put forth the equally bold modern assumption that the human subject has the capacity to perceive God directly – ‘from below’ as it were. At the end of the chapter, we will identify a specific subset of feminists who reject Barth’s method and view of divine-human distinction and freedom. In so doing, we will ask where Johnson’s theological approach seems to fit within this spectrum.¹⁸

I. Feminist Methodology: Starting with the Female Subject

A. Perspectives on the Divine-Human Relation

Accuracy in thinking about God’s transcendence and presence in creation has always been an essential priority in Christian doctrine and speech. If we do not distinguish conceptually and really between God and human creatures, we cannot understand this relation as a real relationship between radically distinct ‘others’ - an essential aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nor, when speaking of God, can we know if we are describing anything other than the content of our experiences, which, according to this tradition, are not divine.¹⁹

For much recent feminist theology, however, this distinction has not been a priority.²⁰ Ironically, while distinction, difference and personal freedom in relation to

¹⁸ An extended treatment of Western feminism’s theological, philosophical, linguistic and socio-political or socio-pragmatic theories and methodologies is not intended. Here the concern is merely to highlight the basic themes of modernism as they play out in Catholic reformism. For an overview of American Catholic feminism, see Rosemary Rader, “Catholic Feminism: Its Impact on U.S. Catholic Women,” *American Catholic Women*, ed. K. Kennelly (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 182-219; and Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Religious Authority* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). For a discussion of the development of Christian/reformist, womanist and post-Christian feminist theologies, see Linda Hogan, *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Paul Molnar begins with this same point in “Can We Know God Directly? Rahner’s Solution From Experience,” *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 228-261.

²⁰ We make the necessary caveat regarding the ability to speak of ‘feminist theology’ at all and what that term might mean. While there is no generic ‘feminist theology’, there are basic unifying tenets common to

other persons are vitally important aspects of women's 'full humanity', they have not been stressed as equally imperative aspects of the divine reality – indeed, they have received a somewhat 'negative press'! Particularly when divine difference and distinction are tied to God's sovereignty and Lordship (generally viewed as 'male-derived' concepts of power used abusively throughout Church history), they are widely perceived as a direct threat to women's human value and personal freedom.²¹ Furthermore, the doctrine of God's aseity antecedent to and independent from his creation is widely perceived as a primary source of patriarchal oppression in the Church.²² Thus 'classical theism' is alleged to promote a view of God as existing in solitary, remote and dispassionate disengagement from the human and cosmic struggle. Ultimately, 'his' identity and authoritarian voice are indistinguishable from the ego-identities and voices of men in positions of ecclesial and societal authority. The result is that in most distinctly feminist descriptions of the divine-human relation, these aspects of identity, distinction and personhood generally do not belong to God; God is not perceived as a distinct, personally revealing and encountering 'Other'.

most Western feminism which include (1) the right of women to define and determine themselves autonomously rather than heteronomously, (2) the identification of equality with worth and with personal identity, and (3) the ascription of the status of oppressors to men by virtue of their gender. In Karen Offen's words, it follows that 'to be a feminist is necessarily to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society'. "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14 (1988): 152. Whereas these tenets generally shape the Western feminist theological worldview, the third tenet is generally redefined in terms of who constitutes 'the oppressor' in, e.g., Womanist, Mujerista and lesbian feminist theologies.

²¹ See, e.g., the essays in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1979), the Introduction to which begins: 'Feminists have charged that Judaism and Christianity are sexist religions with a male God and traditions of male leadership that legitimate the superiority of men in family and society' (1).

²² In *Womanspirit Rising*, Plaskow and Christ credit Rosemary Radford Ruether with first articulating the theory of how sexism in the Christian tradition is influenced by the dualisms and hierarchical mentality of the classical world (4-5). Johnson restates this theory throughout her work. See, e.g., *SWI*, 50-54, 230-231.

Hence, most feminist theological methodology operates from the conviction that women must serve as their own experiential source of divine and human truth.²³ No longer bound by the authority of Christian Scripture and tradition – themselves thought to be male bastions – feminist theology maintains that correct God-talk nevertheless continues to be a matter of projecting a finite (gendered) image onto infinite being.²⁴ This time, however, the image – or *imago Dei* – is female, based upon women's self-experience and self-perception. In other words, if women can find the answer to the question of God within their own experience, they can image God accordingly and live in ethical correspondence to that 'truth'. Hence feminist God-talk generally develops from a particular form of anthropological, transcendental or spiritual female self-expression.

In an effort to break down what are considered the foundations of theological, hierarchical dualism that support ecclesiastical sexism, virtually all feminist theology operates from the principle of *mutual relationality*. This relational concept extends to every kind of human relation, be it with non-human creatures and the environment, with other human beings, or with the divine. However, while distinction is maintained as an essential aspect of the first two relations (environment and other human beings), there is often an intentional blurring of the Creator-creature distinction. The more ambiguous this distinction, the better the chance that the Creator cannot be viewed as 'over' – and thus 'against' – creation and hence will not be considered an oppressive image. Thus, the

²³ See Catholic reformist Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Experience and Tradition," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993), 59-60.

²⁴ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics" in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børreson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 267-291, 286.

prevailing concept used to describe the divine-human relation as non-threatening, and mutually beneficial, is that of 'participation in the divine'.²⁵

Women's understanding of such participation, however, is increasingly difficult to determine, since it has had two major influences: the ever-deepening immanence of twentieth-century liberal, correlational and process theologies (notably Bultmann, Tillich and Hartshorne in reaction to Barth), as well as a rising pantheism within certain feminist circles.²⁶ But this difficulty is also due in no small part to the intentional ambiguity of feminist descriptions of divine reality. However, such ambiguity is to be welcomed over the God of 'classical theism', which in certain feminist circles is especially equated with the *Self*-revealing Triune God of Barth's theology. At present, says process theologian Bernard Loomer, 'an ambiguous God is of greater stature than an unambiguous deity'.²⁷

Thus, in reaction to a Christian view of the divine-human relation caricatured as a belief in 'the lonely, spectral father-god, aloof, above, and indifferent',²⁸ Catholic 'reformism' describes this relation in terms of a relational ontology that incorporates the values of mutuality, reciprocity and equality. This is particularly the case with Elizabeth

²⁵ This is what Linda Woodhead calls the enduring meta-narrative of the 'New Spirituality'. Often presented as an enlightened version of Christianity, it is a totalising philosophy 'which explains everything – God, the world, humanity. At its simplest, the New Spirituality is a holistic spiritual vision. It asserts that we are entering a New Age in which a perennial but long-forgotten truth will be remembered: that all that is, is spirit. Material things, including human beings, are seen as manifestations of this spirit, and so ultimately one. The goal of life is to realise this oneness or 'connectedness' by looking within to the spirit which lies at the heart of all things, and which is one's own true self'. Woodhead argues that Johnson's transcendental, relational ontology is an example of feminist participation in this meta-narrative. See "Spiritualizing the Sacred: A Critique of Feminist Theology," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 191-212, 204.

²⁶ This is also inherent in most Goddess and/or Gaia 'thea-logies' based on circular and/or evolutionary cosmologies and accompanying birthing imagery, e.g. those of Ruether and Starhawk. Colin Gunton describes this pervading 'immanentism' as the general assumption that the world can be understood from within itself and not from any being or principle supposed to operate from without. *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology*, 2nd. ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 2-3.

²⁷ Cited by James J. Buckley, "Revisionists and Liberals," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd edition, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 332.

²⁸ "Trinity and Feminism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 135-150, 139.

Johnson's panentheistic doctrine of the Trinity and the God-world relation. Though her doctrine has a Thomistic cast shaped by the transcendental philosophy and anthropology of Karl Rahner. Under the influences of Pannenberg, Bultmann and Tillich as well, it is hardly surprising to find Johnson rejecting Barth's theological method out of hand as not sufficiently grounded in experience.²⁹ Furthermore, Barth's view of the Triune God in his aseity is not mutually relational enough for her, and, she suspects, hides an inherent subordinationism.³⁰

In this context Johnson seeks to expound a doctrine of the God-world relation and corresponding God-talk that is sensitive *both* to feminist concerns *as well as* to the foundational Christian assertion that there is true, necessary distinction between God and humanity. Her own approach attempts to satisfy both concerns by finding a 'middle' theological ground. In her words, 'Insofar as some form of freedom-in-relation is a hallmark of the feminist ideal as well as of mature human personhood, a model that combines the core insights of both theism and pantheism is sought, one that safeguards the radical distinction between God and the world while also promoting their mutual, if asymmetrical, relationship'.³¹

B. Who Speaks First?

It is not surprising that a feminist reformist like Johnson would specifically reject Barth's thought *in toto* in the development of her own, since for both theologians theology and method are inextricably linked. What we say about God depends on what we believe is possible to say and why. This in turn influences what we say about

²⁹ "The Legitimacy of the God Question: Pannenberg's New Anthropology," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986): 289-303.

³⁰ *SWI*, 205-7.

³¹ *SWI*, 231.

everything else. For Barth, the premier critic of a theology of experience, theology is first a matter of revelation as talk *by* God about God in the Being-Act of His Word, Jesus Christ, and then is a matter of *a posteriori* human reflection upon that Word. In its capacity as witness-bearer to God's real and personal Triune Self-revelation, theology speaks 'second', as it were. It is the language of the Church ontologically grounded in and participating in the *koinonia* of the Triune God.

For Johnson and her colleagues, on the other hand, theology is first 'self-talk'; talk about our humanity and the world in which we find ourselves from our self-perspective. Secondly, it is talk about God. At this point in Johnson's quest to speak about 'divine mystery', she considers it imperative that *women* speak first from their particular human experience and that theology speak 'second' in alignment with women's self-talk.³² This means that truthful God-talk requires rethinking the doctrine of God from an anthropological starting point and then rethinking both in the light of women's co-equal humanity.³³ In her words, this epistemological and hermeneutical starting point 'from below' is the only 'adequate pattern' presently available.³⁴

³² Johnson makes this case in "The Legitimacy of the God Question." See n. 11 above. Francis Martin reflects on this prevailing socio-religious and philosophical worldview: 'What foundationalism is to epistemology individualism is to social theory – both begin with the subject and make the subject the norm of what is true and right'. *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 294. This book will hereafter be abbreviated *TFQ*.

³³ *SWI*, 19. See also Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Women's Experience and Christian Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 144.

³⁴ Johnson believes that the appeal to experience has been at least 'implicit' in the major theological articulations of Christian history (*SWI*, 123, 61). Rosemary Radford Ruether concurs. See *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 12, 13. The inherent problems with this gender-based perspective should perhaps be noted from the outset. If Johnson's starting point is a valid one, then 'what's fair for the goose is fair for the gander'; i.e., one can certainly have two competing gender-based 'Christian' theologies with no external arbiter of 'truth'. If the external criterion of gender can be applied to judge Christian theology as 'true' or 'right', then the possibility exists of establishing competing claims based on countless other external criteria as well. This raises tremendous tensions for the ontological claims inherent in Johnson's Catholic reformism.

A Gendered Hermeneutic of Suspicion

The placement of women at the centre of theological inquiry and making their experience the final criterion and norm for theological reflection, critique, reconstruction and praxis characterises Catholic reformism as a modern liberal and feminist theology.³⁵ Born out of an Enlightenment emphasis on human autonomy and the individual as the arbiter of truth and praxis, Western feminism originally maintained that the experience of the female subject was determinative for true knowledge and a proper view of reality. This meant the rejection of male normativity as the experiential basis for understanding *God, humanity and the cosmos*. Despite recent challenges from postmodern, post-structuralist and certain process feminist theorists and theologians, this appeal to women's experience remains foundational for Catholic reformism in general and for Johnson in particular.³⁶ Johnson and her colleagues consider this gendered appeal to experience to be a social and theological 'leveler', one that deconstructs existing theological and social dualisms.³⁷

Johnson and her Catholic reformist colleagues employ a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion to uncover sexism (understood as a primarily male phenomenon) and its false

³⁵ Theorist/theologian Sheila Briggs reflects on the general methodological use of experience: '[E]xperience is an extremely useful concept because of its fluidity, which allows us to talk about an inherently ambiguous and indeterminate set of connections. It allows us to join the *inside* with the *outside*, our mental worlds with the external universe, our personal meanings with the socially constructed universe which confronts us. Obviously, the interest in making such connections is a modern one, where there is no single divinely ordained order that can legislate with absolute authority these connections as a given'. Briggs, "A History of Our Own," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 168. Barth cites his contemporary, G. Wobbermin (*Systematische Theologie*, Vol. 2, 1921, 455) as typical of this modern, existential 'Cartesianism': 'The I-experience establishes for man the surest certainty for reality that he can conceive of or that is possible for him at all. It is the presupposition ... of all validation of reality with reference to the external world'. *Church Dogmatics* 1.1, 2nd Ed. trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 195. This translation will be used throughout the thesis, hereafter abbreviated 'C.D.'.

³⁶ These challenges shall be raised in the course of this study.

³⁷ We shall argue, however, that this appeal reinforces such dualisms, as they seem to be essential to a gendered feminist construction of divine and cosmic reality. See n. 16 above.

ordering and articulation of reality. Assuming that there is always an oppressive hierarchy in operation, the hermeneutic of suspicion enables the critique of any ideology by asking whose interests are being served in an existing system.³⁸ On the 'interested' assumption that, in Rosemary Radford Ruether's words, what *is* is not what *should be* in regard to women, men and their relational worlds, Western feminism interprets women's historical 'experience' to be one of oppression and marginalization by men.³⁹ It is precisely women's reflection on this 'cognitive dissidence' [sic] of what 'is' and 'should be' that functions as *the* starting point for any feminist theology.⁴⁰ Women analyse their social, historical contexts and experiences and make a subjective judgment as to what is 'good' and 'bad', 'evil' and 'redemptive', based on their current situation.⁴¹ From this analysis, says Mary McClintock Fulkerson, feminist theological practice makes 'the

³⁸ In "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. L. Russell and J.S. Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), 140, Amy-Jill Levine notes that true ideological critique insists on the acknowledgement that 'interpretation is not innocent but interested'; the possibilities of domination exist within any interpretive move. Interestingly, feminist theology seldom acknowledges its own interest as 'dominating', particularly when its rhetoric is shaped by a unique, narrative form of victimisation. Francis Martin, Linda Woodhead and Angela West identify the 'dominating dualisms' inherent in the feminist worldview and their negative effect. See, respectively, *TFQ*, chapters 3 and 5; "God, Gender and Identity," <http://www.lcm.f2S.com/FemTheo/Readings/gender/htm>; and *Deadly Innocence: Feminism and the Mythology of Sin* (London: Mowbray, 1995).

³⁹ E.g., the first of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's four principles of biblical hermeneutics is that of suspicion. In Pamela Dickey Young's formative study of women's feminist experience as theological source and norm, she specifically describes this as 'the experience of questioning all that we have been told about being women'. See *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 55. Though a liberation feminist, Young nonetheless challenges the equating of Christian theology with liberating praxis. Says Young; 'We only know what *Christian* praxis is by reflecting on what Christian witness is'. Unfortunately, Young uses the same method she critiques elsewhere.

⁴⁰ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, xi. One assumes that Ruether is referring here to Leon Festinger's psychological theory of 'cognitive dissonance' – that we experience psychological conflict or dissonance by simultaneously holding mutually exclusive, incongruous beliefs.

⁴¹ *Sexism and God-Talk*, xi-xii. As we shall see, Barth challenges the assumed neutrality or 'critical distance' involved in such 'abstract' cognitive consideration which pretends that the philosopher or theologian is disengaged from practical action and participation.

judgment that historical subjects "women" are not yet fully produced as creatures of God and that such is a wrong to be redressed'.⁴²

This discernment is not a given, however. It requires an *a priori* 'conscientization'⁴³ or self-awareness whereby women perceive the truth about themselves, God and cosmic interrelatedness. Women's conscientization involves accepting a set of universal beliefs about human worth, women and justice *as given* but not yet appropriated.⁴⁴ These beliefs function as ontological principles, methodological principles, 'guiding practices', 'quasi-transcendentals'⁴⁵ or any combination thereof. This means that while the process of *discerning* whether or not a given text or socio-religious system promotes women's full humanity may require an activating event (i.e., asking the 'right' question or experiencing oppression), the underlying truth content is given to women *prior to*, even *independent of* such an event. In short, women have a kind of immanent pre-knowledge about what 'should be' that recognises its presence *and* absence.⁴⁶

⁴² *Changing the Subject* (see n.10) 358. Johnson follows this line precisely. *SWI*, 18. To this end Catholic reformism specifically functions as a 'sociocritical hermeneutic', defined by Anthony Thiselton as 'an approach to texts (or to traditions and institutions) which seeks to penetrate beneath their surface-function to expose their role as instruments of power, domination or social manipulation'. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 379. Original emphasis.

⁴³ This term, developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, means learning to name and change the world. Only by seeing oneself as subject and therefore as separate from the world, says Freire, can one 'decode' and then transform it. In *TFQ*, 158, Martin both challenges whether this process actually modifies the consciousness of the thinking subject and asks just who it is that defines the norms by which one consciousness is considered better than another?

⁴⁴ M. Shawn Copeland describes how the 'religiously, intellectually, and morally differentiated' feminist consciousness can uncover 'how any symbol, idea, or social system' may become ideological. "Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American Theologies," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 357. See also Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond Patching* (Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist, 1989).

⁴⁵ They function, says Rebecca Chopp, both as moral values and as core ideas around which new narratives of God and the world are formed and contested. "Feminist and Womanist Theologies," 394-95.

⁴⁶ Bultmann assumed this kind of interpretive pre-knowledge and pre-judgment when looking for 'deeper' meaning in the transcendently 'real' realm of the Self. Bultmann, however, considered the interpreter's pre-understanding not to be a matter of prejudice, but a way of raising the 'right' questions based on 'right conceptions' and 'adequate presuppositions'. With Bultmann, and influenced by Rahner, Johnson assumes Heidegger's principle of pre-apprehension/pre-conception (*Vorgriff*) in her transcendental anthropology

Johnson describes the 'conscientization' process – women's self-empowerment in rejecting inherited constructions of female identity as they become aware of and actualise their self-worth – as one of *conversion*.⁴⁷ Conversion is not merely freedom *from* oppression, discrimination and violence but freedom *for* self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-determination – i.e., recognising their full humanity and exercising personal freedom in every sphere.⁴⁸ As active subjects, women 'tap into the power' of the self, 'name' themselves as good and equal *imago Dei* and then actualise this identity in their external relations.⁴⁹ The goal is for *women* to 'discover' or 'construct' their own reality and identity – thereby gaining access to their full humanity.⁵⁰

and epistemology. See Anthony Thiselton's discussion of this concept and other liberation Catholic approaches thereto in *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980), 107-114.

In *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 19-22, Alan Torrance refers to the parallels between Kierkegaard and Barth at this point, where each argues that the possibility and condition of recognising something *new* as an act of knowledge – particularly God – is inseparably *given in the event* and not brought *a priori* to the event. Arguing that the 'Moment of Truth' (where the 'new' is apprehended) always gives its own possibility of recognition, Kierkegaard's 'Climacus' opposes the Socratic belief that 'new' truth can be construed from pre-set forms, concepts or ideals immanent in the mind of the 'pupil' and subsequently birthed by the 'teacher' (i.e., through the process of 'conscientization'). Thus, there can be no formal predetermination for knowing God separate from the material content given in the reality of God's Self-revelation (the Word of God).

⁴⁷ This concept of conversion laid down by Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk* (159-183) is fundamental to feminist liberation theology and reflects the influence of Valerie Saiving's key article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising*, 25-42. Johnson also articulates the conversion experience in line with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese as a dialectic of contrast (sexism v. women's human dignity) and confirmation (of women's inherent goodness). See Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). As we shall see in chapter 2, in response to accusations that she simply creates another dominating category or 'universal subject', Johnson argues that in order to create the possibility for meaningful feminist dialogue, she uses 'conversion' as an 'interpreted experience' common to all women. *SWI*, 61-2.

⁴⁸ Ress, "Conscientization," 56.

⁴⁹ Women become aware that they are not 'nonpersons or half persons or deficient persons, but genuine subjects of history'. *SWI*, 63, 67. Who they are 'equal to', God, men or *both*, will be raised in chapter three.

⁵⁰ Architects and builders start with ideas and build with raw materials. Discoveries, however, happen upon pre-existing reality. Johnson interchangeably speaks of women doing both. Alvin Plantinga's term for the former is 'Enlightenment Humanism' or 'Creative anti-Realism': We human beings 'are ourselves responsible for the structure and nature of the world; it is *we*, fundamentally, who are the architects of the universe'. *The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College and Seminary Press, 1990), 14-16.

Kant's methodological influence at this point is straightforward. Knowledge is the exclusive product of the free, thinking subject who, in isolation from the object, not only determines *what* something is but judges its truth content.⁵¹ Appealing to universal *a priori* categories, the mind imposes 'form' on the 'content' we sensorially perceive; thus we have 'knowledge'. In other words, proper 'objects' don't reveal themselves *to* but rather are actively created *by* the mind; hence 'reality' is entirely constructed by the knower in the thinking, knowing process.⁵² Certain Neo-Kantians extended this idea further and proposed an even more constructivist approach by suggesting that the mind *creates* its own *objects ex nihilo*, supplying them with both form *and* content.⁵³

Equating this creative power over reality with language ('language not only expresses the world but helps to shape *and create it*'), Johnson believes that women's diminishment has been 'aided and abetted by male-centered language and symbol systems, key reflections of the dominant group's power to *define reality* in its own

⁵¹ As Louis Dupree expresses it: 'Religion has been allotted to a specific field of consciousness ruled by methods of its own, but the final judgment on truth has been withdrawn from its jurisdiction and removed to the general domain of epistemic criteriology'. Martin, 175, citing Dupré from "Notes on the Idea of Religious Truth in the Christian Tradition," *The Thomist* 52 (1988): 509.

⁵² This includes not only the structures of the phenomenal world, but those such as space and time, object and property, truth and falsehood, possibility and necessity. They are, says Plantinga, 'contributions from our side', somehow owing their basic structure 'and perhaps their very existence to the noetic activity of our minds'. *The Twin Pillars*, 14.

⁵³ In extending Kant's assumptions that the mind actively shapes and conceptualises the phenomena set before it such that we can know an object only insofar as it is already an object of thought, neo-Kantians Cohen and Natorp rejected the assumption that it was necessary to postulate the prior 'givenness' of sensations to thought (assuming that Kant, and arguably Schleiermacher, confused consciousness in the psychological sense with consciousness as the ground of knowledge in a purely logical sense). 'Objects' do not appear as the initial referents of thought but as the stated goal of thought; hence the object, as the product of thought, replaces the Kantian 'thing'. Objects are not 'given' – consciousness forms them. Thinking is thus 'objectifying' but not in the merely individualistic, subjective sense. Thinking, Cohen believed, apprehends Being. Thought constructs objects on the basis of universal laws, such that 'any assertion gains its status as true solely by virtue of its systematic position in a body of universal laws that, in turn, require each other on methodological grounds'. Thus, 'the principle of law has replaced sensory data as evidence for object validity of any cognitive judgement ... *To know is to objectify in accordance with the principle of law*'. Cohen and R. A. Johnson, cited by Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 209-10. As we shall see, Johnson's 'thought' apprehends God such that God is dependent on the thinking subject in order to be 'discovered' and 'known' according to the universal 'law' of 'being'.

terms'.⁵⁴ Women have been 'robbed' of the power of naming themselves, the world and God. Having instead 'to receive the names given by those who rule over them', women live in a world 'created' to some degree by their oppressors.⁵⁵ The feminist quest is to create a more 'just' and 'truthful' world by gaining the power to 'name' or 'recreate' the world based on what it deems to be 'right' based on the primary category of gender.⁵⁶ As Rebecca Chopp explains, 'Women compose their lives. The naming of experience is the activity of constructing an agent who is responsible for her reflection, her practice, and her spirituality. Women name their experiences and thus *narrate the meaning* of these experiences in new ways', particularly when integrating the 'pure idea of God' with feminist values and the stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁷

Ideally, states Johnson, the truly human self 'is *rightly structured* not in dualistic opposition to the other but in intrinsic relationship with the other', whether that 'other' is

⁵⁴ *SWI*, 27, 26 (emphasis added). See the collection of articles entitled *The Power of Naming*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM Press, 1996), and Plantinga, *The Twin Pillars*, 14-16.

⁵⁵ *SWI*, 26-27.

⁵⁶ In the game of social construction, says Craig Gay, words like 'true' and 'right' are actually emptied of all but rhetorical force, since behind them is no universal reality or warrant to which they appeal. Here, '[w]hat passes for "reality" in society ... is something that we determine and construct Together with others we decide, more-or-less deliberately, how our world is to be understood and interpreted, and who we are and how we fit into the world, what is important and why, and conversely, what it is safe to ignore and neglect. This socially constructed "reality" is held together, furthermore, by way of a whole host of assumptions that we take largely for granted, assumptions which provide a framework for making sense of our natural and social environments. Taken together these assumptions form the stock of knowledge that enables us to know and to tell each other who we are and what in the world is "real"' ("Gender" and the Idea of the Social Construction of Reality', *Crux* [March 2000]: 4). Gay refers to the basic premises of Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Penguin, 1967). In Karl Mannheim's work regarding the sociology of knowledge, however, he posits that there is no objective reality in the sense that 'no human thought ... is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context'. This situation can be mitigated by the systemic analysis of as many as possible of the varying socially grounded positions, thus providing for an accumulation of perspectives, e.g., the collected wisdom of a tradition. This accumulated wisdom (e.g., the creedal confessions of the Church) is greater than the wisdom of any one individual. *The Social Construction of Reality*, 9. I am grateful to my colleague Laura Smit for this discussion.

⁵⁷ Chopp comments that Catholic feminist methodology consistently follows some form of narrative of the Christian story, noting that differences in approach are mainly distinguished by the degree to which tradition is considered normative. "Feminist and Womanist Theologies," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 392-3. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, xii.

divine or human.⁵⁸ In other words, we should not find any oppositional dualism in a properly articulated feminist anthropology/theology of mutual interrelation. Paradoxically, Johnson describes her *gendered* theology as eliminating the kind of oppositional 'either-or' thinking endemic to the *androcentric* construction of reality.⁵⁹ However, as Linda Woodhead observes, women's identity is always a matter of self-talk and that self-talk is always *gendered* self-talk.⁶⁰ Thus, women's primary identity is always a gendered identity. Ironically, as already noted, this means that the dualisms that Johnson supposedly abhors and negates are actually essential to her feminist worldview and reformist project and will continue to be as long as feminist theology emphasises that experience determines knowledge *and* that gender determines what valid experience is.

The Hermeneutic of 'Revelation': Women's Experience Over Text and Tradition

Since what has been said to this point seems, at face value, to be wholly incompatible with historic Christianity, the logical next question is, 'how does Johnson attempt to embrace both her experiential starting point and Christian theology?' The answer can be found in the volume *Freeing Theology*, a prime example of Catholic reformism's effort to correlate themes within biblical and Christian tradition with women's experience.⁶¹ In this collection of essays each author presents an aspect of Christian doctrine from the standpoint of Catholic tradition and then reinterprets it

⁵⁸ *SWI*, 68 (emphasis added).

⁵⁹ *SWI*, 69.

⁶⁰ See Chopp, "Feminist and Womanist Theologies," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 391; Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989). Prudence Allen historically traces these and other 'gender' dualisms in *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC - AD 1250* (Montreal: Eden, 1985). For a full treatment of the question of 'gender difference' in terms of gender identity, relations and cultural/theological representations, see Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

⁶¹ See n. 24.

according to the tenets of feminism.⁶² Given the Catholic reformist conclusion that when it comes to 'God' and the divine-human relation 'what is is not what should be', women must give definition to the concept and actuality of God. Hence the attempt is to integrate both worldviews, says editor and contributor Catherine Mowry LaCugna. She argues that these feminists demonstrate what it means to recover, challenge, and, indeed, 'create tradition through reinterpretation' based on the foundation of women's experience.⁶³

In the 'creative' process, however, these two theological worldviews do not hold equal weight. The 'consciously *feminist*' theological point of view takes precedence, transforming both the treatment and the content of the traditional subject matter. Women are in authority over Christian texts and tradition, determining their truth content in relation to women's experience and values, which function as the more foundational reality.⁶⁴ In other words, there is a mandatory capitulation of text and tradition to the externally derived source and set of criteria of feminist experience.⁶⁵ For instance, in

⁶² LaCugna, "Introduction," in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24) 3. 'Each chapter ... [shows how] the subject matter was approached and understood within the Catholic tradition and then ... how feminist principles transform the theological treatment of the subject matter, often down to its most basic concepts and methods'. Nevertheless, says LaCugna, the essays aim 'as much as possible' toward continuity with Christian tradition. These women generally incorporate the anthropological theologies of Rahner, Pannenberg and Bultmann, the praxis-oriented political and liberation theologies of Schillebeeckx, Metz, Sobrino and Gutierrez, and the symbolic theology of 'being' found in Rahner and Tillich. Foundational to all is Schleiermacher's grounding of religious knowledge in human experience. For a comparison of this approach to other Catholic methods and doctrines, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Tasks and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. I, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 1-87.

⁶³ Problematically, *Dei Verbum* actually never asserts that revelation occurs within human experience, a claim, says Hilbert, that has created a tension within Roman Catholicism since the Modernist crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, she argues like Johnson (who even defines experience similarly to Rahner in *SWI*, 293, Ch.7n2), that Rahner and many other theologians 'have pointed out that a dialogical and relational understanding of revelation does *implicitly* locate the revelatory dynamic of call and response in human consciousness'. Hilbert, "Experience and Tradition," 64-65 (emphasis added). How is this 'call' differentiated from the 'voice' of our own consciousness? What 'thematically' identifies it as that of the Triune God?

⁶⁴ Anne Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology – Method," in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24) 5-30.

⁶⁵ According to Fulkerson, the feminist critical principle always has 'primary weight' when correlated with Christian tradition. *Changing the Subject* (see n.10) 36. Linda Woodhead also asserts that for feminists, this commitment always serves as 'a more basic commitment than their commitment to Christianity, even as

these essays Joann Wolski Conn states that the 'object' of spirituality is not a 'Thou' but the experience of self-transcendence toward ultimate being; we reach out toward others from 'the unrealised dimensions' of our own capacities within the horizon of whatever we imagine or judge to be of ultimate value. Ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill explains how natural theology grounds feminist ethics in experiential morality; God's will for persons is revealed in creation as 'an ongoing process of discovering God in human life'. Susan Ross asserts that feminist sacramentalism also involves rethinking from women's experience; the Catholic 'sacramental principle' affirms that 'all of created reality reveals God'. LaCugna argues for an understanding of the immanent Trinity from God's economy in human experience as salvation history. Johnson reconstructs Christology from the 'below' of women's shared experience in divine being and 'the feminist model' of inclusion and reciprocity.⁶⁶

As Johnson explains elsewhere, Catholic reformism asserts that traditional views of revelation, like Barth's, falsely propose 'too radical a distinction between God and human experience'.⁶⁷ Among the more 'viable' models found in contemporary theology used by these reformists are revelation as 'historical event', 'inner experience',

their sole incontestable and un-revisable commitment. When this is the case, the feminist critique of Christianity easily ceases to be a creative dialogue between Christianity and feminism and becomes a rather formalistic exercise in weighing up Christianity against an externally imposed, externally derived and unquestionable standard'. In Martin's terms, feminist consciousness and spiritual awareness become the 'genus', and Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. are the 'species' whose specificity is governed by a feminist worldview. Woodhead, "Spiritualizing the Sacred," *Modern Theology* 13 (April 1997), 192; Martin, *TFQ*, 163.

⁶⁶ Schneiders, "The Bible and Feminism – Biblical Theology," 31-58; Conn, "Toward Spiritual Maturity – Spirituality," 235-259 (237, 239); Cahill, "Feminism and Christian Ethics – Ethics," 211-234 (212, 213); Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women – Sacraments," 185-209 (186, 193); LaCugna, "God in Communion With Us – The Trinity," 83-114; Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ – Christology," 115-138, in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24).

⁶⁷ Johnson, "The Legitimacy of the God Question," 289, endorsing Pannenberg's critique of Barth.

'dialectical presence', 'new awareness' or as 'symbolic mediation'.⁶⁸ Each is basically a method of interpretation that assumes that the text, tradition or symbol must be interpreted from a particular ('mediatory') stance and that the context and keeper of the critical controls is the community's common religious life.⁶⁹ When the 'interpreting community' is women and men struggling against sexism, then interpretation is guided by 'a liberating impulse'⁷⁰ and feminist vision – i.e., 'the new community of the reign of God, in which women are valued as genuinely human subjects in a community of mutual relationship'.⁷¹ This becomes the context and criterion for textual and symbolic interpretation, rescuing the Bible (and God) from 'bondage to patriarchy' through feminist exposure of 'hidden' or 'suppressed' meaning.⁷² If rescue is not possible with a

⁶⁸ *SWI*, 77. Johnson refers here to the five options set forth in Avery Dulles' *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

⁶⁹ *SWI*, 77. What we mean by 'mediatory' is that the theologian somehow stands outside both culture and faith and through her own unaided resources, mediates between them.

⁷⁰ *SWI*, 77. In *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 84-87, Johnson characterises liberationism as (1) conscious of the social nature of human existence, (2) concerned with praxis, (3) recognizing the suffering of an oppressed group, (4) impelled by a realised eschatology, (5) using social analysis to (6) change unjust situations. Despite feminist critique against white, academic women's construals of oppression, the methodology of liberation theology is generally consistent regardless of the oppressed people group. See, e.g., Copeland, "Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American Theologies," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 358.

⁷¹ Johnson, "Feminist Hermeneutics," *Chicago Studies* 27 (1988): 123-35, 129. This article is an endorsement of the Biblical liberationist hermeneutics of Ruether, Schüssler Fiorenza and Letty Russell. Whereas for Barth, 'Interpretation means saying the same thing in other words' (*C.D.* 1.1, 345), for Johnson and her reformist colleagues, 'interpretation' arguably means saying something different in the same words derived from Scripture and tradition. As Ruether explains: 'Either we must discard the authority of the Bible all together, or else we must claim the right to interpret Biblical ideas in a way that appropriates, not only changes in past tradition, but also new insights today as well'. "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 287. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983).

⁷² "Feminist Hermeneutics," 127, 129, 131-2. This has been the feminist assumption since Joan Arnold Romero's early explication of contemporary theology in contrast to Barth: 'God needs to be liberated from our theology. Theology is not a tabernacle to contain the One who is Ahead, but it is a sign on the way, and thus is provisional ... the theological task is less the consolidation of the tradition by looking back than the building of a new vision'. "The Protestant Principle: A Woman's-Eye View of Barth and Tillich," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 319-340, 338-9. Though Romero fails to acknowledge it, Barth too asserts that theology should follow a 'path' like any other critical discipline. The path or 'way of knowledge', however, should be appropriate to and governed by its Subject matter – God – not human subjectivity or methodological procedures borrowed from other disciplines. Barth, *CD* 1.1, 3-44.

particular text, then 'the judgment simply has to be made that *this is not the truth which God wished to have written down for our salvation*'.⁷³ The same approach applies to Christian tradition, i.e., doctrine, creed and magisterial authority. Johnson's primary hermeneutical query reveals the underlying criteria: '[I]f something consistently results in the denigration of human beings, in what sense can it be religiously true?'⁷⁴

Thus, on the one hand, the Biblical text has the quality of a neutral object set between competing value systems and moral judgments.⁷⁵ On the other hand, the text is judged to be either *intrinsically* oppressive or 'incorrectly' and oppressively interpreted. The latter causes feminists to ask how such a text 'which is not just accidentally but intrinsically oppressive' can function normatively for a faith community.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, affirms Sandra Schneiders, modern feminism has the capacity to analyze, critique, and evaluate not only the Christian tradition but also all 'ideas, social structures, procedures and practices, indeed *the whole of experienced reality*'.⁷⁷ Women's task is to reinterpret

⁷³ Interestingly, this same source provides the liberating narratives essential to feminist interpretation *prior* to the application of a feminist hermeneutic. In other words, this good news has 'always been there' without being practically applied to women. Johnson herself admits that this liberating news 'flashes out' from the Scriptures in certain instances', and that 'egalitarian impulses are discernible'. "Feminist Hermeneutics," 131-2, 134 (emphasis added).

⁷⁴ *SWI*, 30.

⁷⁵ Martin cites Meir Stenberg's assessment of this method (reminiscent of Feuerbach): 'the text comes to figure as a kind of glorified Rorschach ink blot on which to project one's ideology, among other forms of licensed desire.' *TFQ*, 206-7. Common sense assumes that by putting the text solely in the hands of the interpreter, there would be as many readings as there are contexts within and from which it can be read, e.g., feminist, anti-feminist, apartheid or traditional Christian readings! Technically this might be the case, but feminist 'moral aspiration' and 'ideological consciousness' adjudicates all readings according to their presuppositional, universal truths.

⁷⁶ Sandra Schneiders asks these questions in "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989), 3-10. Martin states that this approach is a little like asking, "How can *Das Kapital* be interpreted to serve as the charter for the free enterprise system?" *TFQ*, 207-8.

⁷⁷ *Beyond Patching*, 16 (emphasis added). In Thiselton's discussion of understanding and pre-understanding in Schleiermacher, he describes how the kind of 'psychological hermeneutics' found in feminism involves the penetration into the inner consciousness of the author, moving from the general to the particular, i.e., that an understanding of the author's life and consciousness depends on an understanding of human life and existence as a whole. Thiselton refers to T. F. Torrance's article on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, in which he emphasises that hermeneutical success depends on the 'art' of the interpreter to 'recreate' in herself "the basic determination of consciousness [she] finds in the author ...

the texts so that the texts reflect the 'right' experiences in the 'right' way. Thus, asserts

Johnson,

[R]eligions die when their light fails, that is, when they lose the power to interpret convincingly the full range of present experience in the light of their idea of God. If God is worshiped as the guiding reality, the source and goal of all, then truth is tested by the extent to which the idea of God currently available takes account of accessible reality and integrates the complexity of present experience into itself. If the idea of God does not keep pace with developing reality, the power of experience pulls people on and the god dies, fading from memory.⁷⁸

Catholic feminism's three-fold methodological pattern of deconstruction, critical assessment and reconstruction helps to determine whether the tradition is 'keeping pace'.⁷⁹ First is deconstruction guided by the hermeneutical question '*cui bono?*' i.e., who benefits from this articulation or arrangement of reality and its symbolic representations when the hidden dynamic of domination is exposed? This assumes that symbols are never ideologically neutral but function as agents of personal and communal transformation.⁸⁰ Hence the criterion by which theological statements and ecclesial structures are judged for 'truth or falsity', 'adequacy and inadequacy' and 'coherence and incoherence' is their alignment with the feminist critical principle of women's full humanity.⁸¹ Next is the search and retrieval of 'dormant theological themes', 'neglected history' and 'lost wisdom' from Christian symbols, Biblical texts or dogma filtered through the 'lens of women's flourishing'. If the first question is 'who currently benefits by tradition?' the second question is 'can tradition be altered both in form and content specifically to

the key to the interpretation of a text, whether of Plato or St. Paul, is self-understanding.'" *The Two Horizons*, 103-107, citing Torrance, "Hermeneutics according to F. D. E. Schleiermacher," *SJT* 21 (1968): 257-67, 261.

⁷⁸ Johnson, *SWI*, 15, restating Pannenberg.

⁷⁹ *SWI*, 11, 28-33. See also Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," 5-29. For feminist assessments of this method, see Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*.

⁸⁰ *SWI*, 4-6, 36-38.

⁸¹ *SWI*, 30. What if two differing cultures (say, a white female academic and a twelve-year-old Thai girl sold into prostitution by her mother) held two logically incompatible claims about God to endorse the full humanity of women. Would they both be true? What are the criteria for 'full humanity' in the feminist principle? Ruether espouses an egalitarian ideal, but is that the same as Johnson's universal, transcendental ontology/anthropology? What if other feminists do not agree with her?

benefit those who have been marginalised?' If the answer is positive, then the final step of reconstruction begins by revising traditional doctrines, symbols and practice and/or introducing new ones.⁸²

Johnson acknowledges the difficulty of critiquing the tradition while correlating women's experience *with* it: 'The feminist perspective, which honors women's humanity, women as *imago dei*, finds this classical tradition profoundly ambiguous in what it has meant for female well-being. It has aided and abetted the exclusion and subordination of women, but also sustained generations of foremothers and foresisters in the faith'.⁸³ Though 'ambiguous', she still contends that Christian doctrine contains the fullness of the religious heritage for women *precisely as human*.

In sum, Johnson's understanding of women's true value is derived from the sources she deems patriarchal and in need of reform. In other words, though Scripture and tradition supposedly only become 'authoritative' when approved by feminist criteria, they are also the *a priori* sources from which the Western feminist ideal originates.⁸⁴ She also attempts to integrate two different critical approaches in feminist hermeneutics to the Biblical text. One critique is aimed mainly at the *interpretation of the text* by appealing to

⁸² SWI, 29-30. States Bultmann: 'It will be clear that every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, perhaps idealist or psychological, as presuppositions of his exegesis ... But then the question arises, which conceptions ... which presuppositions are right and adequate? ... Your own relation to the subject-matter prompts the questions you bring to the text and elicits the answers you obtain from [it]'. *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM, 1960), 48, 51. Original emphasis. In the end, says Kant, 'The final purpose even of reading the holy scriptures, or of investigating their content is to make [human beings] better,'" which essentially gives license to the knower to "do with [the text] what we like'. Kant, *Religion*, 102, cited by R. R. Reno, "Feminist Theology as Modern Project," in *This is My Name Forever: The Trinity & Gender Language for God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 161-189, 172.

⁸³ SWI, 9.

⁸⁴ Ruether admits to this circularity when, after judging *all* categories of classical theology 'distorted' by androcentrism, she nonetheless considers some categories 'usable' when 'corrected' by feminist interpretation and notes that this occurs unconsciously among post-Christian feminist thinkers like Mary Daly. Ruether, *Sexism*, 38. As Colin Gunton aptly points out, however, a starting point that emphasizes the difference between contemporary and traditional understanding tends to saw off the branch on which it is seated. *Yesterday and Today*, 5.

all or part of it as a transcendent source of judgment (an authoritative canon within the canon). The other critique views *the text itself* as patriarchal and thus in need of correction based on the criterion of praxis or a prior ruling principle (a normative canon outside the canon).⁸⁵

Finally, while 'developing reality' is supposedly aware of its socio-historical location and ideological influence, the 'idea of God' determined from within this context is one that Johnson considers universally binding. Though she acknowledges the need (be it agnostic, pluralistic and postmodern) for a plurality of divine names, all are judged for their truthfulness based on how they reflect this binding concept.

II. Catholic Reformism's Quest for Propriety in God-Talk

A. The Priority of Ethics Over Dogma

Since Johnson is intent on maintaining God-talk as a value, then at issue is where priority for such talk is to be found. She sums up the Catholic reformist question in this way: 'Is the God of the Jewish and Christian tradition so true as to be able to take account of, illumine, and integrate the currently accessible experience of women?'⁸⁶ This is a thoroughly modern, Kantian question as well as the fundamental reformist one. Kant properly surmised that God could not be known like other 'things' as a legitimate 'object' of human knowledge and that awareness of God was a matter of 'faith'. Kant further claimed that faith belonged to the sphere of moral sensibility or conscience. Schleiermacher followed Kant's lead but in turn located that awareness in the experiential

⁸⁵ For a full treatment of these approaches as modern and feminist, see Thiselton, *New Horizons*, especially chaps. 11 and 12, and Francis Martin, *TFQ*, chap. 7, and Martin, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *This is My Name Forever* (see n. 83) 108-135.

⁸⁶ *SWI*, 15-16. So says Ruether: 'Religious traditions fall into crisis when the received interpretations of the redemptive paradigms contradict experience in significant ways.' *Sexism*, 15-16.

sense of 'God-consciousness' as a dimension of human existence. In (adapted) Schleiermacherian terms, humans have the natural capacity for awareness and recognition of 'the divine' or 'the Infinite' through the fundamental feeling of 'absolute dependence'.⁸⁷ Non-objective and indeterminate, this feeling is 'named' by the human subject according to available predispositions and cultural norms.⁸⁸ This led Schleiermacher to conclude that *every* event and object is potentially a locus of 'natural revelation' as a 'sign' or symbolic form of the Infinite.⁸⁹ Thus theology becomes a matter of critical reflection on the symbolic forms in which the intuited sense of God comes to expression in a particular community. Rather than speech about God referring to a divine 'personal other' or an *object* of knowledge, speech represents the subjective experience and values of *the knower* or the knowing community.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Schleiermacher's influence here is foundational, though perhaps it reflects less of his original thought than its historical reconfigurations. Nevertheless, along this trajectory, knowledge – particularly one's knowledge of 'God' – is grounded in and through human experience. In Schleiermacher's original epistemology, immediate self-consciousness is to be conscious of being in relation to God: '[T]o feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation to God are one and the same thing; and the reason is that absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself. This last expression includes the God-consciousness in the self-consciousness in such a way that ... the two cannot be separated from each other ... and if we speak of an original revelation of God to man or in man, the meaning will always be just this ...'. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 4.4, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 17-18.

⁸⁸ '[A]ny possibility of God being in any way *given* is entirely excluded, because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter-influence, however slight this may be. The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption, whether it be a temporary transference, *i.e.* a theophany, or a constitutive transference, in which God is represented as permanently a particular perceptible existence'. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 4.4, 18. Martin quotes Ingolf Dalferth: 'The problem with [Schleiermacher's] approach is the identity of the Whence of our existence in different cases.... That we could not exist without god does not imply that the god without whom we could not exist is God or that it is the same god for all of us'. *TFQ*, 171.

⁸⁹ 'Every finite thing ... is a sign of the Infinite'. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 88, cited by Hart in "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 40.

⁹⁰ In Johnson's words, the symbol of 'God' derived from the 'faith community' is its 'ultimate reference point' implicitly representing what it takes to be the highest good and profoundest truth. *SWI*, 4. This is precisely what led Feuerbach to conclude that God-talk is finally talk only about humanity, which Barth identified as the ultimate judgment on modern, natural theology.

If what is known of God cannot be described with any objective accuracy or adequacy, its form and content must be shaped by the epistemic subject, both cognitively/noetically and linguistically. Thus 'God' is 'known' and spoken of symbolically, metaphorically and non-authoritatively. Kant considered Christian symbols to fail at precisely this point in that they had become authoritative 'modes of representation' rather than symbolic expressions of moral truth as an element of human reason. Like Catholic reformists, Kant considered 'faith', or 'that constellation of historically particular and culturally specific words and practices that make up the Christian form of life', to be in error by making these words and practices authoritative.⁹¹ When they are absolutised and given a noetic actualization, they are falsely assumed to be *saying something* about what *cannot be known*. In contrast, 'religion' belongs to the domain of the subject as 'the disposition of moral rectitude' that gives final authority to our moral sensibility. Faith's content may aid to enliven our moral sense, but it can never be the inner meaning or destiny of the human condition nor can it be intrinsic to our relation to God. This is to confuse the means with the end.⁹² Tradition must be freed from the constraints of what it 'actually says' by applying the 'inner light of truth' inherent in the subject.⁹³

⁹¹ Gunton notes that Christian 'traditionalists' (like Barth) are often accused by proponents of natural theology of accepting the 'authority' of creed and Scripture and then theologising as if there were no problems with this authority, while those who make this accusation falsely consider themselves 'free' of any kind of similar 'authority'. *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 118.

⁹² Kant, *Religion*, 153, cited by Reno, "Feminist Theology," 174.

⁹³ As such, the question driving feminist theology is not the postmodern one – 'whether or not authority?' – but rather the modern one – 'whose authority?' Woodhead draws here with Kant's thought: '[O]ne can find in Kant's work the same understanding of Christianity as a set of beliefs standing over against the individual, and the same criticism of the illicit authority conferred on these beliefs by scheming and self-serving priests'. Picking up Romantic and then feminist overtones through the next two centuries, Christianity is further criticised for suppressing imagination and individual creativity, discouraging embodiment and claiming absolute truth through law and dogma. The main contribution of feminist

This religious worldview grounds three related assumptions for Johnson and her approach to theology as symbolic God-talk: First, Christianity is a religious symbol system; second, 'no human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God'; and finally, that language for God must rely on ever-changing symbols, metaphors and/or analogies in order to be free from rigidness and idolatry.⁹⁴ Hence women look for internal clues for how they experience and interpret reality and then use them to construct a vision of a moral universe that promotes women's well-being and values choosing corresponding religious symbols.⁹⁵

R.R. Reno describes the basic modern syllogistic structure of modern theology as follows: 'Moral aspiration X is the unquestionable good of human life. God is good and surely seeks to promote the unquestionable good of human life. Therefore, whatever promotes the unquestionable good of human life is of God, and what does not is not of God'.⁹⁶ This derives directly from Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* and reflects his critical principle of morality – the full humanity of persons. What is 'of God'

thought, says Woodhead, is its emphasis on 'patriarchy as 'the villain of the piece'. "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 194.

⁹⁴ Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God," 441; *SWI*, 7, 10, 192. Despite the fact that the terms 'analogy', 'metaphor', 'symbol' and 'image' hold specific meanings for certain of the theologians with whom Johnson aligns herself, she uses them synonymously, a practice Janet Soskice considers a key 'defect' in current religious language. E.g., Johnson states, 'I hold vigorously to the idea that theological language always and everywhere proceeds by way of analogy – or symbol or metaphor – and this undergirds my use of Sophia'. "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 110. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), x.

⁹⁵ Like Barth, Woodhead contends that by reducing Christianity to a set of dogmas over against the individual, feminist theology ignores the discourses of Christianity itself and the language of the Church which show the inseparability of God, the believer, the Church and its teachings ("Spiritualizing the Sacred," 194). Barth's deliberate movement away from this kind of subject-centred idealism, says John Webster, is what makes his theology difficult for liberal Protestantism and Catholic revisionism/reformism to assimilate. See John Webster "Introducing Barth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 11.

⁹⁶ "Feminist Theology as Modern Project," in *This is My Name Forever*, 162, 165.

is measured against the bar of the 'unquestionably good'. But what constitutes the 'unquestionably good' and what establishes the criterion? Though Kant's moral interests differ from those of Johnson and Ruether, the logic remains the same. Inherited speech about God is subjected to moral critique: What is consistent with one's ethical vision is what reflects the heart of true 'religion', or the inner kernel of universal truth in the text. Johnson states this clearly in terms of epistemic access, ethical vision and the corresponding reformation of language *as* epistemic discourse:

When the liberating vision of a community of equal and mutual disciples is endorsed and practiced ... language generated by women's experience can interweave with ancient [Biblical] symbols and their hidden recognition of women's creative power and goodness to shape new building blocks for emancipatory discourse about the mystery of God.⁹⁷

Ironically, the only normative limit Kant placed on his critical principle of 'full humanity' was that one's moral action must be 'only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'.⁹⁸ Modern liberals did just that, adhering to the principle with full integrity. However, by using *men's* experience as foundational, the universal law became oppressive and dominating rather than good for all according to feminist critique. Why? Precisely because it functioned as a universal without taking women's experience into account. Hence women have been controlled by someone else's view of what is good and what serves as source and norm for understanding and defining human reality.⁹⁹ This brings to the fore the powerful and pervasive Kantian conviction that any act of knowledge in which the subject is 'receptive' is a diminishment of the subject; hence modernity's tendency to equate

⁹⁷ *SWI*, 103.

⁹⁸ Martin, *TFQ*, 294.

⁹⁹ In "What is Enlightenment," Kant's classic defence of intellectual freedom, he states, 'Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another'. See Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *What is Enlightenment?*, 2nd ed., revised, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 83.

authority with domination and thus to give priority to the hermeneutic of suspicion.¹⁰⁰ This conviction seems to underlie feminist theological interpretation and reconstruction in general.

The only recourse Catholic reformism has as a modern theology is to exercise the same privilege – i.e., to establish a new universal for the good of women, men and creation – only *after* replacing the pre-existing (male) subject and the norm of experience with their own universals of ‘women’ and ‘experience’.¹⁰¹ While acknowledging that any absolute or universal claims are forbidden according to the tenets of pluralism and postmodernism, reformists also claim that their way of knowing and being leads to a deeper, universal truth regarding the relationality of all being previously hidden or suppressed.¹⁰² In Johnson’s postmodern battle *against universals* (to counter *imperialist* anthropologies) she ultimately uses *universalising categories* motivated by a ‘pragmatic, common sense concern’ for women’s justice. In short, she necessarily ends up using an oppressive methodology to fight oppression.

As Francis Martin suggests, the reformist conviction of ‘suppressed truth’ deriving from the Enlightenment identification of causality with domination results in

¹⁰⁰ This seems remarkably similar to the traditional interpretation of the defining problem in Genesis 3.

¹⁰¹ Despite the appeal to ‘women’s’ experience, it is actually the experience of the autonomous relational self – i.e., the individual in relation. Whereas feminism attempts to reconstruct the basis for one’s ‘right’ to full co-equal humanity within the larger context of relationality, it still starts with the individual, i.e. human beings are constituted and endowed with rights *prior* to any relationship. Traces of Kant’s self-determination and moral autonomy, Hobbes’s notion of autonomous freedom as a ‘state of nature’ and Locke’s emphasis on natural freedom as ‘self-evident’ are common in feminist ‘relational’ rhetoric. Making an interesting case for social but *not* interpersonal ‘rights’ is John Hardwig’s “Should Women Think in Terms of Rights?” in *Feminism and Political Theory*, ed. C.R. Sunstein (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 53-67.

¹⁰² *SWI*, 31-33; “Forging Theology,” (see n. 14) 95-96. As Colin Gunton notes, ‘The contradiction at the heart of postmodernism, that it seeks to free modern culture from the repressive and ‘totalizing’ discourse of modernism by means of a totalizing discourse – for it claims to account for everything – is even more repressive, however, because it is insidious. That is to say, it is a claim which pretends not to be one, and because it cannot be disputed within the terms of the assumptions it makes, it is either self-defeating or self-validating.’ *Yesterday and Today*, 217.

what he considers not only the most pervasive and destructive of feminism's presuppositions but, sadly, exactly that which feminism tries to combat as a political, social and religious ideal.¹⁰³ This prioritising of the 'interested ethic' over any other criterion for theological 'truth' highlights Catholic reformism's primary commitments to a political or sociological ideal over theological authority. As Johnson passionately argues, right speech for God is profoundly substantive, reflecting both '*the truth* of divine mystery' and '*the quest* for a more just and peaceful order among human beings'.¹⁰⁴

B. The Modern Inversion of Historical 'Relations'

At the beginning of this chapter we identified two primary characteristics of the modern methodology of Johnson and her Catholic reformist colleagues. First, they start anthropologically 'from below' to 'discover' theological truth by making the female subject the source and norm for what is true and 'right'. Second, the limits of knowledge of the Transcendent are determined by the human capacity for knowledge of the divine.¹⁰⁵ Both characteristics, as we shall see, are shaped by the over-arching principle of relational being derived from a contemporary understanding of the *analogia entis* as human participation in divine being. These foundations set the methodological pattern and epistemological parameters for human knowledge of and relation to God.

This pattern is governed by two sets of relations. The first set deals with the relations between *knowing and being* and between *possibility and actuality*, where in

¹⁰³ *TFQ*, 184-185.

¹⁰⁴ *SWI*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁵ For a concise summary of how and why contemporary Catholicism employs modern liberal Protestant strategies, see Neil Ormerod, *Introducing Contemporary Theologies: The What and the Who of Theology Today* (Australia: E.G. Dwyer, 1997), 27-41, and David Tracy, "The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 548-570.

each case, the former precedes the latter, thus inverting the traditional order.¹⁰⁶ The second set concerns the relations between *the knower and what is known* and between *what the knower knows and how language communicates that knowledge*.¹⁰⁷ Modernism inverts the order of knowing and being so that questions of epistemology precede ontology, i.e., epistemology becomes the 'gateway to the real'.¹⁰⁸ 'Things' are constituted by our mental or conceptual activity that we impose on the world by way of our linguistic or symbolic activity, our decisions, etc. Hence, 'possibility' becomes the leading category for interpreting the world, which inverts the pre-modern understanding that actuality precedes possibility (i.e., where, and who, we come from determines who we are).

This 'self-liberation' from the tradition and turn toward the open future as a realm of endless possibilities dislodges Catholic reformist methodology from any historical continuity with the Christian tradition. From this 'liberated' position, Johnson advocates the agnostic dualism between the phenomenal world *versus* the 'unknowable' noumenal realm – which places the knowing subject squarely in the centre of what is known and how it is articulated. God is essentially 'unknowable' and thus limited to our symbolic expressions. Simultaneously, God cannot be limited by or to any of them.¹⁰⁹ Thus, Johnson clears the slate of traditional God-talk in favour of newer 'symbols'.

¹⁰⁶ I am using Christoph Schwöbel's description of these inversions found in "Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 17-36.

¹⁰⁷ I am indebted to Francis Martin for this description. His study of Catholic feminist method set forth in *TFQ*, particularly chapters 5-8, and "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *This is My Name Forever*, 108-135 has helped to shape my own thought in this section.

¹⁰⁸ Schwöbel, "Theology," 29.

¹⁰⁹ There is no understanding of God as a supra-cognitive personal reality distinct from and impinging upon human existence. Revelation of God is conditioned by the self-knowledge and self-description of an 'other'. This implies that God either has no active agency as a personal 'other' or 'self' who can create and determine his own relational reality or that it is justifiable for women to determine the reality of this 'other' despite feminism's universal claim to the contrary. What ultimately defined Cohen and Natorp's constructivist position, says Hart, is their conclusion that while God was a necessary or valuable *human idea*, there was no suggestion of God being a *personal reality* or 'other' in relation. "Revelation," 39.

In the inversions of knowing over being and possibility over actuality, says Christoph Schwöbel, the human subject becomes the 'place' where the possibility of knowledge is found and where its actuality of being is determined; even the subject's own being is determined by its possibility of knowing.¹¹⁰ In other words, the 'privileged subject-matter of knowledge' is not the external world but the subject itself who must in turn possess the conditions for the possibility of knowing the external world. Starting 'from below' (methodologically) with the human subject (anthropology), knowledge of God depends on the possibility inherent in the human being (the epistemological 'gateway'). Schwöbel describes this as a necessary correspondence between modern presupposition and method:

[T]he epistemological question is radicalized to become the question of the constitution of subjectivity ... This also explains the modern preoccupation with matters of method: one must have clear and distinct foundations of knowledge in order to proceed on the way to knowledge. The possibility of proceeding on this path determines the reality of the world.¹¹¹

As a result priority is necessarily given to epistemic over noetic discourse. What do we mean by this? Noetic (first level) discourse, as described by Kenneth Schmitz, is an original, spontaneous, yet *receptive* discourse under the influence of the concrete situation that 'has its own integrity and can find expression in various ways'.¹¹² Language pre-exists both the communicator and the recipient as non-private, existing in the public domain and held in common by them.¹¹³ There is a 'communication event'; in its

¹¹⁰ Schwöbel, "Theology," 29-30.

¹¹¹ Schwöbel, "Theology," 30.

¹¹² "Neither With Nor Without Foundations," *Review of Metaphysics* 42 (1988): 15.

¹¹³ Wittgenstein and Jaakko and Merrill Hintikka argue that the idea of 'private language' with 'private meaning' is incoherent. Wittgenstein asserts that for terms to be meaningful they must adhere to public rules of meaning. Meanings cannot change privately but must necessarily be grounded and perceived within a public process. Thus the meaning of terms is their *use in the public domain*. The Hintikkas believe that language can be argued to be the universal medium of reality (thought processes and interpretative possibilities being linguistically constituted). If our cognition is *language-bound*, however, it logically cannot be private. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York: Harper, 1969); Jaakko and Merrill Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969). I

actualisation language 'says something about something'.¹¹⁴ Epistemic (second level) discourse, on the other hand, is concerned with *the manner* in which truth is mediated. At this level, certain cognitive values are selected as foundational presuppositions; these in turn provide the hermeneutical framework for discourse, establishing a selective 'canon' or over-arching principle by which to measure all truth claims.¹¹⁵ Again, this assumes there to be a 'prior knowledge' inherent in the subject that gives precedence to his/her way of knowing what is 'true' or 'real' over what is known and how it is communicated.¹¹⁶ Thus feminist theology asserts that language represents the process whereby concepts are imposed upon private, pre-linguistic experience in an attempt to understand and communicate it.¹¹⁷

When revelation is disconnected from God as the Subject of his own Being-Act, it becomes the cognitive, moral and linguistic domain of (in this case) the female subject. The relation between God (what is 'known') and God-talk (how it is communicated) is experientially derived and symbolically articulated. At issue is whether God is not ultimately dependent upon and/or indistinguishable from creaturely existence and noetic

am indebted to Alan Torrance for this discussion in *Persons in Communion*, 96-98, and his article, "The Self-Relation, Narcissism and the Gospel of Grace," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 481-510, 493-4.

¹¹⁴ Schmitz, "Neither With Nor Without Foundations," 19.

¹¹⁵ Rather than noetic discourse being the basis for epistemic discourse, says Schmitz, the foundations are rather 'the implicit preferences or explicit epistemological decisions taken in favor of a project ordered toward methodologically justified truth – a truth justified insofar as the method, horizon, canons and relevant evidence permit'. "Neither With Nor Without Foundations," 23. Alasdair MacIntyre challenges this premise in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

¹¹⁶ Here again one sees the influence of Heidegger and Bultmann. For Heidegger in particular, the hidden meaning behind language or the text was 'Being'. Martin, "Feminist Hermeneutics," 119.

¹¹⁷ Woodhead strongly criticises this view for ignoring the complex ways in which knowledge is acquired and the 'textualised' nature of the process which takes place in being members of communities shaped by texts and traditions: 'contrary to the belief of much feminist theology, we do not have pre-social, pre-linguistic and pre-cultural 'experiences' and then shape tradition, texts and community out of them. I do not spin God out of my own private experience of the divine; I know God because he was manifest in Jesus Christ, and because the scripture, tradition and community which formed me bear witness to Him'. "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 198.

thought in this feminist system. Certainly the Christian texts cease to be an instance of intersubjective discourse as the language of the Church.¹¹⁸ The 'interested' reader/interpreter is ultimately in control of the text and its meaning and so controls the 'possibility' and the determination of what constitutes accurate knowledge of God.

III. *Feminist Theology's 'Yes' and 'No'*

The final question that needs to be examined in this chapter is the relationship of Elizabeth Johnson to the larger spectrum of feminist theology. What is it that Catholic reformists and certain other feminist theologians have in common by way of affirmation: their "yes"? At the same time we must note their common "no" – their rejection of the distant, indifferent, father-god from 'above' (the god, says Janet Soskice, feminists equate with Christianity and love to hate).¹¹⁹ A convenient way to do the latter is to see how several prominent feminist theologians stand in relation to a common theological opponent, Karl Barth. Barth is viewed as representative of this concept of God. He also is accused of devaluing women in his view of the divine-human and human-human relation. Finally, he rejects the natural theology that shapes most feminist approaches, giving epistemological and methodological primacy to women's (or any human) experience. To a very limited degree, this thesis will engage in aspects of Barth's theology. In the process, we will show whether this as a valid feminist interpretation and criticism of Barth. At issue, however, is where Johnson generally fits within the feminist spectrum given her stated theological commitment to the Christian tradition. The remainder of the

¹¹⁸ Martin's critique in chapters 6 and 7 of *TFQ* is extremely helpful in this discussion, and draws from a wide range of linguistic theories and debates. See also Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 28-36, who discusses this in relation to Barth's approach to language and 'commandeered' theological speech.

¹¹⁹ "Trinity and Feminism," 139.

thesis will examine what precisely she affirms and denies in her panentheistic, 'Trinitarian' doctrine of the God-world relation.

A. Affirming Women in the Relational Imago Dei

The interpretive concept or paradigm used by Catholic reformists like Johnson to define human identity and experience (in its fullest sense) is nothing less than the concept of woman as *imago Dei*. This is a familiar strategy in feminist theology when using Christian categories to talk about humanity. It aligns the feminist critical principle – the promotion of the full humanity of women – with the *imago Dei*.¹²⁰ Whereas historically the term *imago Dei* implies that God is the antecedent to which the human image corresponds, an experiential starting point 'from below' requires looking first at the human image and then deducing (or projecting) the character of 'God'. Hence Catholic reformists look first at the female image and ask about God as a corresponding concept. In this way women discover their 'full measure of human equality and their Christian identity as *imago Dei*, *imago Christi*, temple of the Spirit'.¹²¹ In sum, their particular way of being in the world gives them epistemological access, as well as concrete content, to what constitutes humanity as *imago Dei*.

¹²⁰ Women as *imago Dei* is the 'centre of gravity' for feminist theological reform and discourse. *SWI*, 62. Carr states that Ruether aligns the feminist critical principle with 'the ancient principle of the *imago dei* or Christ as the goal of humanity'. "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," 14. This 'ancient principle', however, is not grounded in the Genesis creation account (Gen 1-2) or the particular life of Jesus Christ who bears the *imago Dei* in his humanity and divinity (Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:44b-49; Col 1:15).

¹²¹ Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (London: SCM, 1998), 34-5, 27; *SWI*, 17-18. This hermeneutical 'lens' focuses Church's sin of sexism and its collusion in the 'sinful distortion of existence'. Thus Johnson defines Christian reformism as the *a priori* 'reflection on God and all things in the light of God that stands consciously in the company of all the world's women, explicitly prizing their genuine humanity while uncovering and criticising its persistent violation in sexism, itself an omnipresent paradigm of unjust relationships'. *SWI*, 8.

Johnson's primary feminist presupposition is that the female *imago* is inherently *relational*.¹²² Feminist theological reflection assumes that the cosmos and the divine exist in interdependent relationship grounded in being. It further assumes that the human image precedes and 'names' the divine image - *even if* divine *being* precedes and enables human *being*. In short, to understand women as the image of God, Johnson and her feminist colleagues begin with the female subject when drawing the theological-hermeneutical circle of inquiry. Assuming that God *is* - and, in a reversal of the *imago Dei*, *looks and acts like women in their relationality* - the question of God is nevertheless raised farther along the circle:

What kinds of beings are we who have shaped this dissident world and imposed it on one another, often lying to and deluding others and ourselves in the process? This reflection on what kind of beings we are ... can then shape our reflection about our relation to the community of beings around us ... Finally we ask about deity as the underlying source of life and renewal of life of this whole process.¹²³

¹²² 'The genius of feminist theology has been to see that for the traditional eschatological dream to become historical reality at all, the liberation of women as genuine human persons in communities of mutuality is essential'. *SWI*, 32. Anne Hunt believes the 'extraordinary novelty' and the 'fundamental *raison-d'être*' of Johnson's 'relational' approach to trinitarian doctrine 'paves the way to recognizing women as *imago Dei*'. *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist, 1998), 29. For a recent discussion of the historical concepts of the self in terms of trinitarian theology and the image of God, see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), particularly chapters two and three.

¹²³ Ruether, *Sexism*, xi. Does this mean that in Ruether's initial assessment *all* human beings - including women - are (self-) deceptive, delusional and imposing (as well as the 'underlying deity')? If so, it is ironic to say the least that she believes these human beings to have the capacity to develop a positive constructivist approach toward 'shaping reality'. This points to another internal inconsistency within Catholic reformism. There is a constant denial of the Fall as a theological and ontological reality, *especially* as it concerns women. However, there is also a constant recognition of sexism as 'sin' - even 'falling short of the glory of God' - in terms of *functioning* as less than one's '*imago Dei*' or 'full humanity'. E.g., Johnson interprets Irenaeus' axiom "*Gloria Dei vivens homo*" to mean that the glory of God is every human being, fully alive. Negatively, '[w]herever women are violated, diminished ... God's glory is dimmed and put at historical risk; hence sexism is religiously unconscionable' (*SWI*, 14-15). And yet, she also states that 'feminist theology repudiates an interpretation of the death of Jesus as required by God in repayment for sin. Such a view today is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent and sadistic father, reflecting the very worst of *male behavior*. Rather, Jesus' death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human *men*, *as sin*, and therefore against the will of a gracious God'. (158; emphasis added). In political and liberation theologies, including feminist versions thereof, Johnson argues that 'salvation' has nothing to do with atonement for sin. Here the Christian understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ as redeemer and reconciler are completely separated and redefined. This will be discussed further in the next two chapters.

In response, Johnson, Ruether and their colleagues answer the question regarding women's 'kind' of being in two primary ways; first, they are inherently relational, and second they are divine image-bearers. These ontological and epistemological assumptions set the terms for both transcendent and created reality. Specifically, women 'name' themselves and *then* God from the overarching principle of mutual interrelation, which Johnson claims, is 'inscribed at the heart of all reality'.¹²⁴

Johnson also argues that the *imago Dei* is an essential definition befitting *all* humankind based on her thoroughly essentialist position.¹²⁵ The Scriptural interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative and its centrality to Christian anthropology underscores an 'intrinsic relation' between all human beings, so that the portrayal of male and female as created in the divine image and likeness, each as themselves and both together,

¹²⁴ Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 32. Generically, 'mutuality' and 'connectedness' are among what Rebecca Chopp calls feminism's 'leading principles'. 'Connectedness' signifies the interconnected matrix of reality in which we always exist, and is used to speak about structural and relational 'sins' of injustice and inequality that manifest systemically. 'Mutuality' goes further to include all interpersonal relationality, divine and human. The term "mutuality" suggests that to be connected, to seek connections, to build communities, is a transformation of suffering into flourishing, of evil into good. Whereas historically this 'trait' has been considered inherent to and/or socially determined for women, feminists seek to make it a foundational value in *human nature*. See Chopp, "Feminist and Womanist Theologies," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 396.

¹²⁵ This view of an essential 'human nature' is critiqued in feminist and womanist thought by Elaine Graham, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Paula Cooley, Janet Jakobsen and Sheila Greeve Davaney among others, each asserting that women do not 'possess' a common nature or an individual identity that is essential, unified and stable; i.e., they are not 'selves' with an unchanging core that undergoes experiences. States Graham, '[M]any critical studies of gender display a scepticism concerning a universal or supra-cultural 'human nature' that endures throughout history and social conditioning. Although certain biological imperatives may persist – reproduction, nourishment, survival – these are always already intertwined with cultural elaborations; we cannot extricate ourselves from our present context and formulate a metaphysical model of human nature. So whatever human nature may be, even if there are universal common elements, they remain inaccessible to our understanding beyond the medium of our own culture and interpretation'. Graham, "Gender, Personhood and Theology," *SJT* 48 (1995): 341-58, 354. On the other hand, argues Davaney, neither are women 'the curiously similar disconnected subjects of much postmodern lore', but are rather 'synthetic selves' whose identities emerge out of the commingling of multiple and varied, contradictory influences. Davaney's de-centered historical and process approach can be found in "Continuing the Story, But Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology* (see n.36) 198-214. For Fulkerson's poststructuralist critique of the modern feminist enterprise as a whole, see *Changing the Subject* (see n.10).

'intended the compliment for women and men equally' (Gen 1:26-27).¹²⁶ Furthermore, their reciprocal relation is the basis for understanding a community of mutuality.¹²⁷ Hence for women to bear the *imago* of the divine is to be autonomously equal to but different from men in mutual relation.¹²⁸ Assuming that the *imago Dei* identity has already accrued to men, she states that women *too* 'are really and fundamentally human, with a nature that is essentially human nature, intrinsically belonging to the human race, created in the image and likeness of God'.¹²⁹

While Johnson identifies this as the 'original' Judeo-Christian understanding, she argues against the Hellenistic influence on Roman Catholic history and with it a hierarchical, gender dualism. In this view, reality is divided into two separate and opposing spheres and promotes a two-tiered vision of reality, privileging the elite half of a pair and subordinating the other such that [her] value is only as it serves the higher.¹³⁰ Besides becoming the foundation for theological and social sexism, it encouraged a

¹²⁶ Johnson, "The Greater Glory of God: Woman Fully Alive," in *A Spirituality for Contemporary Life*, ed. David Fleming, (St. Louis: Review for Religious, 1991), 76. Johnson recognises no prizing of men over women in this text. God made *homo* (*ver* and *mulier*) in the divine image. In fact, she affirms that it is precisely Jesus' identity (and solidarity) as *homo* – *et homo factus est* – that gives the incarnation its universal, salvific relevance. The inclusive *homo* signifies that divine incarnation means becoming human, not male. 'It is a mistake akin to heresy to locate the *imago Christi* in sexual similarity to the human male Jesus. Being conformed to Christ is not a sex-specific gift. It consists rather in embodying Jesus' compassionate, liberating manner life and the paradox of his dying and rising through the power of the Spirit'. "A Theological Case for God-She: Expanding the Treasury of Metaphor," *Commonweal* 120 (1993): 9-22, 10. Ironically, Johnson appeals to Jesus' 'generic' humanity (which she freely admits includes his maleness) rather than accounting for his 'gendered' particularity in his own historical context which includes his radically positive treatment of women. In this case, it appears that particularity is a threat. His gender as an aspect of his humanity is completely minimised in her Christology while female gender is maximised in Johnson's description of Jesus as 'Sophia's Child'.

¹²⁷ *SWI*, 70; "The Greater Glory," 76.

¹²⁸ Says Marcia Riggs, 'We are created in the image of God in particularity and difference, and we affirm that image in others by respecting (not denying) difference ... equality in feminist and womanist thought is a relational concept, and the term is replaced by concepts such as partnership, mutuality, and solidarity. Equality thus refers to relationships that empower groups of people who have been considered unequal on the basis of differences'. "Equality," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 84-5.

¹²⁹ Johnson, "The Greater Glory," 68. This is paradoxical, to say the least, since the feminist argument is that women's experience provides the criteria for what it means *to be* fully human *in contrast* to what has been lacking from male normativity. How then, can men be considered to have attained 'full humanity'?

¹³⁰ Johnson, *Women, Earth*, 10-11.

subtle drift toward the view of two separate human natures.¹³¹ Where theology (and liberalism in particular) actually held to a view of one, essential 'human nature', such nature was understood in terms of *male* experience, making 'the independent, solitary self' the human ideal. The result is that a 'deep ambiguity' has 'afflicted' the doctrine of *imago Dei* in its failure to account for women's coequal humanity and inherent relationality.¹³²

Johnson combats this 'bipolarity' by positing 'one human nature celebrated in an interdependence of multiple differences'.¹³³ Her 'multipolar' approach seeks to avoid using universalising descriptions that level out genuine particularity and at the same time to downplay any particular characteristic (e.g., gender) as more important or more fundamental than another. In her words, she hopes to 'to reorder the two-term and one-term systems into a multi-term schema ... which allows connection in difference rather than constantly guaranteeing identity through opposition or uniformity'.¹³⁴

This emphasis on relationality is not at the expense of women's autonomy or self-determination, however.¹³⁵ Every woman has the task of 'centering herself, affirming herself, and choosing her own life's directions', thereby 'cultivating' the generally undeveloped sense of herself as an *active* subject and counteracting 'culturally induced

¹³¹ Not only has Catholic feminism judged sexism in all its forms to be 'sinful', (e.g. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision," in *Womanspirit Rising*, 140; Ruether, *Sexism*, 160, 164), but so has the Second Vatican Council. Section 29 of the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" states that 'every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent'. Cited by *SWI*, 276n17.

¹³² *SWI*, 9-10, 70.

¹³³ *SWI*, 155.

¹³⁴ Johnson, "The Maleness of Christ," in *The Special Nature of Women? Consilium* 6, ed. Anne Carr and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991): 111. Each humans has his or her own unique mix of determinations, such as sex, race, historical and social location, etc.

¹³⁵ Johnson considers the notion of *relation as the principle of self-distinction* to thwart the tendency toward pantheistic absorption which she views as stereotypical of 'the feminine' in theology. *SWI*, 232.

habits of drift and self-denigration' that come from being defined off the (male) other.¹³⁶ In short, her self-exercised autonomy is foundational to her experience of full and healthy humanity. Nonetheless, women's autonomy as subjects is not to be understood in individualistic, liberal terms. Rather, Johnson describes the ideal human experience as 'relational autonomy' or of the 'self-in-relation'; this autonomous distinction-in-unity simultaneously honors the inviolability of the person while understanding them to be *essentially* constituted to be in mutual relation.¹³⁷ The pattern of mutuality and reciprocity between these 'relational selves' is marked by 'equivalence between persons, a concomitant valuing of each other, a common regard marked by trust, respect, and affection in contrast to competition, domination, or assertions of superiority'.¹³⁸

In sum, feminist theologians generally affirm the ontological priority of relation. Relationality is viewed as constitutive of women's being, either emanating from or participating in 'divine' being as inherently relational. Thus, some concept of ontological relation informs the divine-human relation. Drawing the hermeneutical circle from below, this concept is derived from women's experience as essentially relational and essentially good.¹³⁹ Theologically, this feminist affirmation is a direct challenge to what is perceived to be the Christian God of 'classical theism'; the poorly relational God who, when 'he' is described in relational terms, is considered dominating and oppressive. To the God who

¹³⁶ *SWI*, 226. This assumes that the 'Western' process of psychological individuation belongs universally to the gendered experience of 'femaleness' in every culture.

¹³⁷ 'Neither heteronomy (exclusive other-directedness) nor autonomy in a closed egocentric sense but a model of relational independence, freedom in relation, full related selfhood becomes the ideal'. *SWI*, 68.

¹³⁸ *SWI*, 68. See also Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 6. Looking closely at the source and criterion for this kind of ideal, mutual human being in relation, however, we are not led to a common male *and* female experience but to *women's* experience as *opposed* to *men's* 'wrong' experience. Even the appeal to 'inherent relationality' as constitutive of humanity is revealed through women's 'way of being', again in opposition to men. The difficulty stems from trying to talk about essential humanity when appealing to *gendered* experience as source and norm.

¹³⁹ As has been shown (and will be again in the next chapter), this essentialist position is not accepted by all feminists.

in freedom is Lord, King and Sovereign over all he has made, feminist theology issues a resounding "NO"!

B. Feminism's Vis-à-vis

'No' to the God of Classical Theism

Feminist theology – as relational ontology – considers the crux of the matter to be transcendence *versus* immanence. In other words, it has to do with God's being and self-determination in freedom and distinction *from* creation and God's presence *to and with* creation. This is perceived as a fundamental dualism – the disengaged God 'out there' *versus* the involved God 'in here' – rather than as a mutually coherent description of the mystery and holiness of God who, while wholly for, remains wholly other than, his creation. Divine 'transcendence' is perceived as the culprit behind Roman Catholic theology's dualisms of matter/spirit and nature/grace which in turn promote an inherent gender dualism.¹⁴⁰

From Johnson's perspective, it is the God of 'classical theism' – which she and certain colleagues are inclined to identify as the God of Karl Barth – which has elevated transcendence to such a degree that the 'God out there' has overwhelmed any sense of God as immanently for, with, even *in* creation. 'Classical theism' purportedly promotes a view of God as the Supreme Being who made all things and rules all things but is essentially unrelated to, unaffected by and independent from creation. Hence God

¹⁴⁰ 'Humanity is detached from and more important than nature; man is separate from and more valuable than woman; God is disconnected from the world, utterly and simply transcendent over it, as well as more significant than it'. Johnson, *Women, Earth*, 10-11. She claims that such an arrangement only benefits men 'of the ruling classes'. Does she mean that men of lower classes and different races are on equal, oppressed footing with women and so are not oppressors? Is she implying, e.g., that when one South African woman is raped every twenty-six seconds (*Time Magazine*, Nov 1, 1999), the perpetrators are all men of the 'ruling class'? Paradoxically, as Johnson argues for the dismantling of these 'dualisms', she also needs them order to define her oppositional stance.

remains disconnected from human experience. Immanence slips from view as stress is placed on God's absolute transcendence and all-pervasive, dominating power to which human beings owe submission and awe.

Transcendence also corresponds to divine Lordship, an idea utterly rejected by feminists as antithetical to the mutuality at the heart of true relation.¹⁴¹ The same hermeneutic of suspicion that judged women's experience to be one of oppression has judged the God of 'classical theism' to be the paradigmatic non-relational, oppressive Sovereign.¹⁴² Johnson and others argue that the historical focus on God's triune being *in se* apart from the economy of salvation has both perpetuated this view and encased God in static, complex, over-literalised patriarchal images.¹⁴³ Given that God's transcendence is equated with spatial and relational distance, God is deemed incapable of the mutual reciprocity and equality at the heart of feminist relationality.

¹⁴¹ The humility of the Son in Phil 2:6-11 has no bearing on this concept, nor does the central affirmation of the Christian Church, namely, the lordship of Jesus Christ at whose name every knee shall bow and tongue confess. Such a confession, says Elizabeth Achtemeier, is now understood 'as a distortion of the biblical witness!' ("Female Language For God: Should the Church Adopt It?" in *The Hermeneutical Quest*, ed. D. Miller [Allison Park: Pickwick, 1986], 97-114, 110).

¹⁴² *SWI*, 19-20; *Friends of God and Prophets*, 16-21, 105-108 and passim. Johnson follows Vorgrimler's definition of theism in Herbert Vorgrimler, "Recent Critiques of Theism," in *A Personal God? (Consilium 103)*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel (New York: Seabury, 1977) 24. This resembles Moltmann's opposition to "monotheism." As Janet Martin Soskice observes, however, this definition more accurately describes the God of 'deism', a view already rejected by Christianity. "Turning the Symbols," in *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), 22. In *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), William Placher explains how this view of theism only gained prominence in the seventeenth century; thus current protest should not be directed against the Christian tradition but against 'what modernity did to it'.

In Charles Marsh's review of *SWI*, he states: 'I found it odd that Johnson directed most of her polemic against classical theism and all of its invidious consequences ... rather than critically examine the very tradition that calls her own project into being'. "Two Models of Trinitarian Theology: A Way Beyond the Impasse?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21 (Spring 1994): 59-67, 62.

¹⁴³ *SWI*, 19-21, 40. She echoes Ruether, Sally McFague and Karen Bloomquist. See, respectively, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 23; "God the Father: Model or Idol?" in *Metaphorical Theology*, 145-192; "Let God be God: The Theological Necessity of Depatriarchalizing God," in *Our Naming of God*, ed. Carl Braaten (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 45-60.

In an attempt to undermine all dualisms as inherently oppressive, feminist 'relationality' rejects any kind of 'theism' that upholds God to be 'wholly other', i.e., having ontological distinction from and priority over creation without being necessarily related to it. Because of the assumptions involved, logically and practically this rejection of 'classical theism' also means a rejection of Barth's theology of divine-human relation. Feminists are generally disinclined to view God as Barth's self-revealing, triune 'I' whose aseity is complete, and completely free, in loving relation to humanity's 'Thou'. Knowledge of God begins with the finite 'I' who relationally/ontologically participates in, 'moves toward' and finds herself encompassed by the infinite or 'divine' which may *or may not* be described in personal terms.

Fortunately, says Johnson, 'classical theism' (the 'inherited doctrine of God') is inexorably deconstructing under the pressure of historical experience.¹⁴⁴ First, nineteenth and twentieth-century atheism, then liberation theologies and now skeptical and/or nihilistic postmodern worldviews show that the traditional doctrine of God cannot withstand historical conditioning and contextualising.¹⁴⁵ Traditional faith in God as 'Other', having a reality and an identity distinct from human existence and experience, is no longer viable. Any claims to the contrary by appeals to 'divine revelation' (e.g.,

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, "The Search for the Living God," *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 10:3 (September 1994):1-2; *SWI*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ This requires theological contextualization and religious plurality/ambiguity of expression in terms of God-talk. *SWI*, 20. In "Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God," *Review for Religious* 53 (1994): 6-28; and "The Search for the Living God," 5-14, Johnson argues that in the postmodern situation four developments hold promise: suffering-based theology, feminist theology, interreligious dialogue, and the new dialogue between science and theology influenced by the approaches of Rahner, Moltmann, Kasper, Sobrino and Keck.

Barth's thinking about God *from* God) are naïve, irrelevant and ultimately 'inappropriate'.¹⁴⁶

The next chapters focus on Johnson's own theological ontology, method and God-talk – which she argues keeps divine transcendence and immanence distinct from human experience and also free from oppressive, dominating human systems. In Johnson's panentheistic view, she first redefines transcendence and then argues that transcendence and immanence are 'correlative rather than opposed'.¹⁴⁷ First, however, by way of comparison, we will look briefly at a few cases where feminist ontologies summarily dismiss Barth's theology by re-working the categories of transcendence and immanence.

'No' to Karl Barth

If Karl Barth is well known for his emphatic 'No!' to Emil Brunner's defense of natural theology (or some kind of human capacity for divine revelation), then feminist theology is becoming equally well known for its equally emphatic 'No!' to Karl Barth's own theological method and content. Given that Western feminist theology is a wholeheartedly modern natural theology, this rejection of Barth's thought is hardly surprising. Barth inverts the modern inversions on the presupposition that God is the divine Subject, the distinctly personal 'Other' whose Being and supremely free Actuality both precede and create the possibility and reality of his own Self-revelation. Barth maintains that the Triune God, witnessed to in the Scriptures, makes himself known to us, and in so doing also gives us true knowledge of ourselves, in a loving, miraculous and wholly personal divine-human 'encounter' with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴⁶ "The Right Way to Speak About God: Pannenberg on Analogy," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673-692.

¹⁴⁷ *SWI*, 231.

This creates numerous problems on the feminist front. *Methodologically*, most feminists reject Barth outright because he fails to comply with modern epistemological principles, primarily the control of the human subject over knowledge and truth. To think about God and then everything else *from* God rather than from the ontic and noetic capacity of the human subject, i.e., orienting revelation and Christian speech 'from above' so that God is the primary Subject and Self-Revealer, is perceived as a threat to women's freedom. Here freedom is understood as exercising the 'rights' of active subjects to think and speak from the foundations of their experience. The theological *content* of Barth's view of the divine-human relation as a covenantal relation between Creator and obedient creature also tends to be an anathema to the feminist consciousness, which is conditioned to reject any form of submission as oppressive and life-destroying. Finally, Barth's view of divine and human freedom determined by and realised in God's free Self-gift of the Son and the Holy Spirit as an act of *reconciliation*, and the ultimate understanding of divine/human unity-in-distinction to be found in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, are all alarming when interpreted through a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion that equates divine authority and freedom with (male) domination and rejects the notion of sin as an inherent human condition.

In short, Barth's view of God and the God-world relation is generally considered lethal to women's well being. Catherine Keller couldn't make it plainer: 'we no longer honor the binary of a subject dominating its object – as supremely codified in Karl Barth's "wholly other," the subject in relation to whom we are all objects'.¹⁴⁸ And yet the

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996). Jane Barter responds to feminist Beverly Harrison's similar critique of Barth's 'masculinist universal generalisations' in "A Theology of Liberation in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV/3," *SJT* 53 (2000): 154-76.

foundations of modern thought make this claim only partially true. Feminists may have rejected God as an independent and antecedent Subject in relation to whom they are objects, but the subject-object binary appears to remain in full force. This time, however, it is women who are the subjects while God is the passive object governed (dominated?) by the feminist universals of justice, being, experience and relationality.¹⁴⁹

Of the relatively few feminist theologians who have in fact engaged with Barth, most either state their case in direct opposition to him or else use him to represent what is formally and materially unacceptable from the Christian tradition to feminist theological epistemology and relational ontology. A brief survey of arguments by German Protestant feminist Dorothy Sölle, process theologians Thandeka and Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Catholic reformist Rosemary Radford Ruether help to illustrate this point. For instance, Sölle originally developed her theology in direct contrast to Barth (and Bultmann).¹⁵⁰ From her vantage point Barth's God is nothing more than the projection of the disconnected, all-powerful male ego remaining 'outside' of human experience and suffering. Furthermore, Barth's renewed concept of God as the transcendent, 'phallocratic', patriarchal Lord of humanity only reinforces an oppositional and oppressive divine-human relation, belittling human beings by accepting them only when

¹⁴⁹ In McFague's *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), in which she brings together insights from process theology, feminist epistemology and ecology, McFague argues, as Johnson sometimes seems to, for a 'subject-subjects' model that extends to the created order 'the practice of loving God and neighbor' as subject, *not merely objects for our use and control or means to our own end*. This implies, however, that God is a Subject to be known and loved, something which McFague fails to recognise, and that the subject-subjects model in Christian theology is based, from both the biblical narrative and the tradition, on the priority of the relationality of the divine persons. See Kathryn Greene-McCreight's critique of McFague in her review of *Super, Natural Christians* in *Modern Theology*, 15:3 (July 1999): 369-371.

¹⁵⁰ Though Sölle initially embraced Bultmann's existential hermeneutic over Barth's rebuke of the liberal correlation of theology and experience, she ultimately rejected both as 'un-engaged' with real questions of justice. Although her theological conditioning and political hermeneutic are informed by the Holocaust, she apparently ignores Barth's practical and theological response to the same and his efforts of behalf the Jews.

they acknowledge their worthlessness and impotence before him.¹⁵¹ This denies the essential goodness of human beings in the *imago Dei*, including their self-determination and immanent capacity for 'saving' love.¹⁵²

Reconstructing the concepts of transcendence and immanence, Sölle develops the idea of divine 'transcendent immanence'. The Creator-creature distinction is abolished.¹⁵³ 'God' is simply the totally immanent, 'mystical' element of existence, defined as 'loving interrelation,' that somehow also remains radically, transcendently 'free'.¹⁵⁴ All creation is grounded in and embodies this transcendent immanence that is 'one' with 'life'. The divine 'difference' of this life force is utterly commingled with any and all concrete reality.

Using a similar concept, process feminist **Thandeka** puts forth 'the embodied self' as the intersubjective source and domain of reality.¹⁵⁵ To retrieve the 'self' (the 'site and sign' at the centre of human meaning and agency) overlooked by Kant and Freud, she

¹⁵¹ Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 185.

¹⁵² Articulating the classic liberationist approach upheld by Ruether, Johnson, Schüssler Fiorenza, etc. al., Sölle claims that human beings are called to redeem creation from 'sin'. Here the cross is not a payment for sin but 'the risk Jesus and all people take when they unmask the idols and announce the good news that God is with those who struggle for justice and communicate loving life'. Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 185-88, citing Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 145-50. 'Original sin' is not only rejected, but the 'fall' of Genesis 3 is 'a good thing', what Sölle calls a liberation into knowledge, action and self-reliance. See Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Towards a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 126-29.

¹⁵³ Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 102. Sölle concludes (137), 'The most telling argument against our traditional God is not that he no longer exists or that he has drawn back within himself but that we no longer need him'.

¹⁵⁴ Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 188-9. 'Transcendent immanence' is therefore 'radically free from our ideologies of domination'.

¹⁵⁵ 'The human body is the magisterium of human knowledge as both teacher and student, subject and object of life'. Thandeka, "The Self Between Feminist Theory and Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 79-98, 79. Thandeka aligns herself with the psychological intersubjectivist approaches of Robert Stolorow and George Atwood, the Jungian claims of Ann and Barry Ulanov and the developmental theories of Heinz Kohut and D.W. Winnecott. Thandeka (80) defines the embodied self as 'the felt [but cognitively empty] congruence of mind and body with the surrounding environment as one moment of lived experience'.

reaches for the theology of Schleiermacher.¹⁵⁶ This necessitates a rejection of Barth's view of the Triune God, revelation and the Creator-creature distinction. Barth's Trinitarian 'fallacy' involved not only the absolute distinction but also the divide between God and sinful humanity which only God himself could mediate. Thandeka explains that this failed 'trinitarian heresy' and 'speculative philosophy' perpetuated by the likes of Hegel and Barth has made it terribly difficult 'to establish an internally coherent, theoretically respectable position which affirms *unity* as well as *difference* as core to human experience'.¹⁵⁷ Why? Because the *Spirit* is the (mediating) locus where difference and distinction between God and humanity is understood.

Schleiermacher provides Thandeka a way out of the 'trinitarian' impasse by affirming the experience of human 'cohesion' (the unmediated, indissoluble unity of finite and infinite) without appealing to God's nature and revelation as its source.¹⁵⁸ Insisting with Schleiermacher that a mediating principle (i.e., the Holy Spirit) is unnecessary for knowledge and experience of infinite reality, Thandeka claims that we can know and experience 'the divine' as life itself. A 'third' element is only necessary if one believes like Barth that without the Spirit humans cannot hear the reconciling Word of God as distinct from their self-awareness, a premise that any intersubjective feminist theology 'cannot affirm'.¹⁵⁹ Thus, in Schleiermacher's theory of human experience, the nonsensate feeling (*Gefühl*) of human self-consciousness provides a 'theological'

¹⁵⁶ Thandeka, "The Self," 85.

¹⁵⁷ Arguing against Hegel's Trinitarian dialectic and his view of the Holy Spirit (or self-consciousness) as mediator and bridge between theology and theory, Thandeka contends that this idea of a 'bridge' only reaffirmed the unreal split between *Geist* and body that Schleiermacher and intersubjective feminist theologians reject. Thandeka, "The Self," 81-83.

¹⁵⁸ "The Self," 79, 82-3, 93-6.

¹⁵⁹ "The Self," 95. To Barth's question of Schleiermacher, "Rightly understood, is not *everything* revelation, and again rightly understood, *nothing*?" Thandeka says *exactly*! Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923-24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 236, cited in Thandeka, "The Self," 94.

category for describing the primordial place of mental and physical convergence with infinity, or what she calls the 'embodied experience' of the 'inner other' as an indissoluble part of one's self.¹⁶⁰

Davaney, on the other hand, credits Barth with reconceiving the 'wholly other' God as neither static nor impersonal but ultimately relational; a gracious, loving and dynamically related being for whom relationship is 'the core of divine reality'.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Davaney acknowledges Barth's positive association of divine power with love, knowledge and freedom manifest in God's gracious and loving relationship with the world.¹⁶² Nevertheless, his theology and method create irresolvable tensions for Davaney. Why? Because Barth maintains that God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is the presupposition, basis, content and criterion for all human God-talk and self-understanding (she sees this as 'determinism in the strictest sense'). Not only does this set the controls for knowledge of God outside human experience, but God's Being-Act in Jesus Christ is a matter of prior, divine, ontic independence and self-sufficient Lordship. Thus divine

¹⁶⁰ This 'inner other' is spoken of by Stolorow, Atwood and the Ulanovs. Thandeka claims that Schleiermacher 'went looking for the embodied self' most prized by feminist theory and theology 'and found it'. "The Self," 94.

¹⁶¹ Davaney undertakes a detailed analysis of Barth and Hartshorne in her Harvard dissertation, *Divine Power*. Though Barth 'rightly' rejects a static view of deity, Davaney believes his conception of divine power as the double form of divine self-determination and world-determination too closely aligns the idea of 'omnipotence' with its 'traditional' conception.

¹⁶² *Divine Power*, 227. Though Davaney acknowledges that Barth and Hartshorne connect power to knowledge and love and differentiate divine power from all forms of brute or evil force, she is concerned that neither takes evil seriously enough (226). In *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 97-113, much of which is a direct distillation of the first half of Davaney's *Divine Power*, Anna Case-Winters rejects Barth for the same reasons. His rejection of natural theology 'and any other position that implies that knowledge of God is a public and available possibility' erroneously leads him to view God as Subject and 'Lord' with control over both the *content* and *process* of knowing. Case-Winters alleges that Barth maintains the 'classic' Calvinist sense of divine power as 'the mode of domination and control' that eradicates the creature's true, reciprocal freedom. She uses Elizabeth Johnson's argument to make a case for multiple God-concepts and names based on God's essential unknowability. Lee Snook attempts to move beyond the presuppositional idea of power as coercion of the weak by the strong by considering two alternative forms found in American history – the power of equality and of dissent – and what he calls the power of 'the Spirit', in *What in the World is God Doing?: Re-imagining Spirit and Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 95-98.

power is God's capacity to self-determine and, in and through that act of self-determination, to maintain all realities distinct from God.¹⁶³

This stands in direct opposition to process feminism's understanding of divine/cosmic mutual relationality and intersubjective co-determination.¹⁶⁴ Thus, while Barth's Trinitarianism points to a more social interpretation of God's internal being, his insistence on God's 'internal self-sufficiency' undermines a genuinely social conception of the God-world relationship.¹⁶⁵ Even in God's 'powerlessness' manifest in the humanity of the Incarnation, God remains intrinsically independent of and in control over rather than *divinely* dependent upon and conditioned by that external reality.¹⁶⁶ She sums this up in terms of process and feminist views of relationality: '[W]hile Barth makes the notion of relationship central to his understanding of deity ... he does not conceive of [the God-world relationship] as entailing any of the social dimensions normally associated with relationship: reciprocity, mutual conditioning, and social interaction'.¹⁶⁷ Davaney also believes Barth to fail on methodological grounds by not adequately accounting for the

¹⁶³ *Divine Power*, 58.

¹⁶⁴ *Divine Power*, 25. Davaney's concern (59) is that God (in divine self-determination) is only affected or conditioned by an independent, prior knowledge and will of the world rather than truly *by* the world.

¹⁶⁵ *Divine Power*, 230.

¹⁶⁶ *Divine Power*, 59. This means that the cross, rather than indicating true powerlessness or weakness on God's part, underscores divine superiority separate from any creaturely reality. 'God acts with equal omnipotence in all circumstances, in apparent impotence as well as strength, as object as well as subject, and as servant as well as Lord'. For Davaney, Barth's assertion that God's self-determination to be *for* humanity, conditioned and determined by the world in Jesus, is meaningless if such worldly conditioning and determining are merely 'secondary' realities enclosed within God's self-determination. Anna Case-Winters considers Barth to hold a docetic view: The Incarnation is merely 'a divine deception' in which God appears vulnerable but merely 'puts on weakness as one would a garment'. *God's Power*, 112.

¹⁶⁷ Davaney first considered Barth's 'failure' to reconcile his 'relational' assertions with God 'wholly otherness' to be the result of trying to graft a traditional notion of omnipotence onto his own revolutionary concept of the relational God, but later saw it as a result of his attempt to apply the 'concept' of relationality to God and the world and still maintain their ontological distinction. This critique, however, fails to remember Barth's essential criteria for knowledge of God – which it is given *in* and never apart from God's own Being-Act. This leads her to misunderstand him to use the overarching concept of 'relationality' as a *tertium quid* governing both God and creation, something Barth attempts to avoid at all costs by acknowledging God's being as setting the criterion and possibility for our knowing or relating to him.

'twentieth-century reality' of historical conditioning – the mediated, 'socially circumscribed character' of *all* thought and experience given shape, content, and value by culturally conditioned linguistic and symbolic forms.¹⁶⁸

Ruether, whose assumptions are foundational to Catholic reformism, has repeatedly articulated her immanentist position in contrast to Barth's theology 'from above' as a return to an understanding of God as 'wholly other' than one's religious aspirations and experience.¹⁶⁹ Ruether specifically discusses Barth's clash with the liberal foundations of feminist theology in terms of the *analogia relationis* v. the *analogia entis*.¹⁷⁰ In short, Barth rejects her primary foundations; that the *analogia entis* expresses the reality of sharing in divine being, that in the Catholic view human goodness is distorted but not lost in the Fall, and that men and women are equal in 'the original State of Nature'.¹⁷¹ She in turn rejects Barth's Reformed understanding of human depravity that both emphasises the radical distinction between God and humans which denies any shared 'being' between them, fallen humanity's natural incapacity to know and please God, and its utter dependence on God for salvation. In Ruether's view, women are

¹⁶⁸ *Divine Power*, 235-9. '[A]ll knowledge, truth, and value as well as the concepts and symbols that express them are relative to the context within which they emerge' (236). Davaney draws this 'conclusion' from the 'intellectual perspectives' of Collingwood, Troeltsch, Berger and Luckman, Geertz and Kaufman.

¹⁶⁹ See *Women and Redemption*, 179-184, 275-281; "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 282-288; "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective," in *Womanspirit Rising*, 43-52 (50). Barthian theology may have emerged from the Second World War 'with heroic credentials', says Ruether, but in its later forms of neo-orthodoxy, it failed to adequately deal with the questions of historical relativism and social justice so essential to feminism. *Women and Redemption*, 180.

¹⁷⁰ In "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 280-283, Ruether describes Barth, Bonhoeffer and Brunner as all rejecting the *analogia entis*, or 'the similarity of spiritual substance between humans and God'.

¹⁷¹ These are foundational to Ruether's feminist claims for equal rights and personal autonomy. Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 279.

inherently good as participants in divine being who can 'know' and project their 'image' onto God as agents of their own redemption.¹⁷²

Ruether criticises Barth's use of Buber's concept of the 'I-Thou relationship' and the *analogia relationis* as an analogical concept for interpreting divine-human distinction. She argues that Barth and others shifted focus away from Buber's original concept of subject-subject equivalence, even when expressing subjective *difference* toward a hierarchical, subject-object relation (divine-human, male-female, mind-body, ruler-ruled).¹⁷³ In its true sense, which Barth distorted, the divine-human 'I-Thou', equally expressible as the human-divine 'I-Thou', is a relation of mutual equality and reciprocity between God and humanity who are equal but different in kind of being. Barth's belief in the absolute gulf between the divine and the human, says Ruether, is what 'establishes the most hierarchical model imaginable as analogue for male-female relations'.¹⁷⁴ His 'defense' of a hierarchy in the Trinity between Father and Son plays out in male-female (superior-inferior) relationality that ultimately suggests women are subhuman and do not truly 'image' God.¹⁷⁵

Though Barth argued for the essential, equal and mutual humanity of women and men through the humanity of Jesus Christ, she believes his social ordering of creation renders it meaningless.¹⁷⁶ He justified the culturally and androcentrically conditioned

¹⁷² Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 275.

¹⁷³ Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 281.

¹⁷⁴ Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 283.

¹⁷⁵ Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 282-3. Ruether believes that further attempts by the likes of Paul Jewett (*Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relations from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975)) and Jürgen Moltmann (*God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985)) to articulate the essential equality of male-female relationship as *imago Dei* also fail because of their reliance on the divine-human inequality inherent in the *analogia relationis*.

¹⁷⁶ This is a valid and serious criticism of Barth's theology. Though this thesis will not discuss this in any depth, we fully acknowledge the unfortunate, even dangerous inconsistency in Barth's thought at this

social roles of men and women by drawing a parallel between the divine-human and male-female 'I-Thou' rather than being controlled by the Incarnation and God's Triune revelation at this point. He then exacerbated the problem by claiming that such social ordering was by divine, nonnegotiable decree.¹⁷⁷ Ruether's only remedy, however, is to 'remove entirely any idea that the divine is superior to the human and the dominant side of the partnership' and to adopt a modern liberal view that upholds the goodness and potential for good in human nature without the need for divine intervention 'from above'.¹⁷⁸

What consistent critiques do these feminists raise against Barth? First, Barth's assertion that God is 'wholly other' and thus not *necessarily* related to humanity goes against the primordial grain of feminist epistemology and its conception of what a relational ontology involves.¹⁷⁹ Second, participation *in* the fellowship of the Triune God – as *exclusively* through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and as an act of *reconciliation* – challenges the belief that humans are essentially good (i.e., sin is not a human condition) and as such can know and manifest the divine without the need for an external redeemer. Third, God's revelation of himself is both transcendent and immanent – the holy and wholly Other making himself known to sinful humanity – which challenges the assumption that God can be discovered *a priori* by human beings from their own self-

point, as pointed out by Ruether and taken up by others like Paul Fiddes, "The Status of Woman in the Thought of Karl Barth," in *After Eve*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), 138-155.

¹⁷⁷ Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 283, referring to Barth's CD III.4. Mary Daly claims that Barth bought into the belief of Western religious consciousness that 'the husband dominating his wife represents God himself'. Daly, "After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness," in *Womanspirit Rising*, 53-73 (54, 55). Gerard Loughlin contends that Barth also fell prey to cultural 'gender anxiety' and 'homosexual prejudice'. "Sex Slaves: Rethinking 'Complementarity' After 1 Corinthians 7.3-4," in *Is There a Future*, 173-192.

¹⁷⁸ Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 284.

¹⁷⁹ Piet Schoonenberg explains this dual necessary relationship in strictly modern Catholic terms in *The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship in the Whole of Creation and in Jesus Christ*, trans. Dell Couling (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 84.

experience. Fourth, Barth's view of God as the Subject of theology and the Creator and Lord of his creation is filtered through the *a priori* feminist assumption that authority inevitably equals dominating power. Hence, feminists are led to understand God's self-determination and freedom as a threat to creaturely self-determination and freedom.¹⁸⁰ Finally, and along these same lines, Barth's belief that in Jesus Christ God manifests Godself in/as a male human, from which Barth sets up a hierarchy of relation for male and female relations, invalidates his view of Jesus' humanity as a model of new humanity for *both* men and women.

IV. Summary and Critical Questions

Johnson vis-à-vis Barth

By espousing a contemporary Trinitarian theology formulated within the debates of the last century, Johnson's own theological approach cannot help but rely on Barth on the one hand and reject certain of his assumptions on the other. She relies intrinsically on Barth's assertion that God's Triune revelation and economic activity are wholly consistent with God's immanent, eternal Triune being – that the Triune God is God for us and with us. Yet her transcendental anthropology and relational ontology presuppose the human capacity to directly apprehend God to be for the world based on an interdependent, mutually conditioned divine-human relation. Following Karl Rahner's lead, Johnson states that if the concept of God confesses the infinity and the incomprehensibility of holy mystery, then 'it actually postulates thereby a history of our

¹⁸⁰ These issues are also raised by Romero in "The Protestant Principle," 327.

own concept of God that can never be concluded'.¹⁸¹ Anyone who claims knowledge of God greater than this on the grounds of 'revelation' is 'ignoring the situation of being created and forgetting this deep wisdom of the tradition. We are dealing here with mystery that goes beyond all thematizing'.¹⁸² Her own *a priori* assumptions, however, represent an elevated form of 'thematizing' about the mystery of God.

Johnson rejects her interpretation of Barth's view of divine revelation and God's subjective objectivity: 'If liberal theology created too close an association between bourgeois culture and the idea of God, Barth's response was every bit as problematic in the radical dissociation it presupposed between God and human experience'.¹⁸³ Her doctrine of God and Trinitarian symbol are offered in direct contrast to this view. She posits that from human, particularly women's, experience, we know that God '*is never not related to the world*'.¹⁸⁴ God and the world mutually indwell one another; God is inextricably bound to and mutually conditioned by human experience.¹⁸⁵ In this 'fundamental vision of mutual coinherence', the 'accent on divine relatedness to the world overcomes the isolation of the patriarchal God of classical theism'.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ *SWI*, 7-8, citing from Rahner, "The Specific Character of the Christian Concept of God," *Theological Investigations* 21 (23 vols. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961-1992; New York: Crossroads, 1980-1992), 89. This series will hereafter be abbreviated *TI*.

¹⁸² *SWI*, 112. We are also apparently dealing first with our pre-apprehension and then our concepts derived from self-awareness and experience and not with an 'Other' through personal, divine encounter.

¹⁸³ Those who have not dealt adequately with Barth frequently make this critique. For instance, 'traditionalist' Paul Zahl states: 'Barth did not start with Jesus. He started with the electing or sovereign God ... [and] God's electing choice rather than God's grace in Christ in particular. Barth's God was *too* removed, *too* other. ... We are therefore neither Feuerbach's disciples nor Barth's'. *A Short Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 9. Alternatively, see e.g., Bruce McCormack's seminal work on Barth's early theology, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), wherein McCormack specifically defines Barth's theology as 'Christocentric' (453-55). McCormack also describes Barth's electing grace *only* in and as Jesus Christ, in "Grace and being: the role of God's gracious election in Karl Barth's theological ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 92-110.

¹⁸⁴ *SWI*, 236.

¹⁸⁵ *SWI*, 230-32.

¹⁸⁶ *SWI*, 231.

And yet, *how* is God related to the world? What constitutes the conditions of that relation, including the capacity of women's finite experience to bind and condition the infinite? If women's experience sets the criteria for understanding this 'never-not-relatedness', is God's relation to the world (at least to humanity) a *personal* relation? If so, what is its source and norm? If one were to look at women's relational experience in the twentieth century, for example, is relational experience derived from Chiang Ch'ing, the sadistic wife of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, who related to her 'egalitarian' fellow communists by having them brutally murdered on a whim, or is it the way Mother Teresa related to the untouchables of Calcutta?

Or is Johnson's ideal of 'relational autonomy' the experiential model? If 'autonomous selves' are deemed to be essentially constituted by *equivalent*, mutual relations, is this true in the divine-human relation – that it is one of *equivalence*?¹⁸⁷ While Johnson seems to imply that this is the case – analogically, through their proportional 'share' in being, God and the world are in 'mutual, if asymmetrical relationship' –¹⁸⁸ this would seem to require that God be considered a personal 'other'; the free, active, divine Subject who, like the female subject, has the 'relational autonomy' to 'name' and express his own relational 'reality' in freedom?

Or is Johnson thinking in spacio-temporal terms? Are God and the world in a spatial and thus temporal relation to each other (like two objects on my desk)? If the relation is ontological, are, God and the world instantiations of being or is it a relation of

¹⁸⁷ Johnson argues that this ideal is both *from* human experience and one that needs to be *imposed* on experience for it to come into being. This same 'chicken and egg' problem surfaces later when she speaks of relationality in terms of Trinitarian and human community.

¹⁸⁸ *SWI*, 232.

priority, i.e., God as origin/Cause and the world as instantiation of being/effect? Whichever it is, how does women's experience tell us this?

Johnson's theological proposal will attempt to address at least some of these questions of relation. Her proposal nevertheless rejects the view that God is the Self-determining Subject in complete, relational Self-fulfilment as Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is also in free, loving, covenanting, personal relation to and with his creation in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Why? For God to have both the freedom to choose to be related to creation and to choose the conditions of that relation seemingly cannot be divorced in feminist theology from God the Sovereign oppressor. It is presuppositional that any 'Lord of' must also be 'Lord over' as defined by the feminist view of classical theism.

Johnson's Catholic Reformist Challenge

In the Catholic reformist feminist worldview, questions of human and divine freedom/distinction and appropriate God-talk begin with the ethical concern, 'whose interests are being served?' The 'right' answer is 'women's interests' on the assumption that these interests serve all humanity. Certain *a priori* universal principles are consistently and unapologetically at work in this approach, establishing the criteria and setting the controls for what can be known about God, how it is known and how it can be communicated. Ultimately, the possibility of 'knowing' God rests with the inherent capacity of the human being to discern what is other than herself as a part of her existential reality. Invariably, these presuppositions have tremendous influence on Johnson's understanding of the actuality and possibility of divine and human freedom and personal distinction. If revelation is no longer a matter of hearing the Word of the personal 'I' spoken to his human creation as present among them and accepted by them

as his Word in faith, but rather a matter of interpretation based on women's feminist 'consciousness' of relationality, then the Christian 'idea of God' can only be retained if God's relation to the world is reinterpreted on the basis mutual coinherence.¹⁸⁹ This principle governs the theological and ontological basis for speech about God from women's *essentially relational* experience.

What kind of God promotes 'justice for all'? One that is mutually, non-hierarchically and panentheistically related to creation (i.e., ontologically equal in relation, if not in substance). What then is the right way to speak about God? Speech that uses images from human experience where this kind of relationality has been lived out. Where is the source and norm for such speech and experience? Women's ontological and relational experience. What threatens the possibility of this kind of God-world relation is a distinctly personal God who exists in free, self-determining relation to creation and whose behaviour and character are revealed through male images and a male incarnation. When God is 'other' on these terms, particularly as *Lord*, 'He' cannot be trusted to be a God who will not dominate. This is the God of classical theism, and this is the God laid at the feet of Karl Barth. Both have been dismissed out of hand as irrelevant to what feminist consciousness has made known to be 'true'.

Ironically, Johnson, Catherine LaCugna and Anne Carr each acknowledge history's indebtedness to Barth's 'stirring up' of the doctrine of the Trinity as essential to

¹⁸⁹ For this reason, says Francis Martin, 'feminist interpretation is not theology in any sense of the term [when read against the understanding of the early Christians]; there is no thinking with assent, if assent means consenting to the light of revelation. It represents a capitulation to the Enlightenment refusal to accept any interventions of God in this world. There is no revelation, and there is no body of texts that expresses the church's interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ [as a matter of faith]'. *TFQ*, 205.

their own Trinitarian understanding of the divine-human relation.¹⁹⁰ Despite this indebtedness, however, each rejects Barth's view of revelation and divine aseity, opting instead for some form of relational ontology and modern methodology.¹⁹¹ Apparently it follows that any theistic view which maintains that God in his Triune Being is absolutely and irrevocably distinct and 'wholly other' than (even if freely *for*) his creation also considers God a 'solitary narcissistic being who suffers from his own completeness' while limiting the freedom of his creation.¹⁹² If this is so, then feminism ought to have nothing to do with such a God. But is this the Triune God of the Christian tradition whom Barth understands to be *God for us* in every way? We shall see. Since Johnson claims to have moved beyond Barth and the challenges he raises, the question at stake is, How so? Furthermore, do Johnson's panentheistic ontology and its female Trinitarian symbol fit 'within the contours of the Christian faith' as she claims?

Johnson's own challenge, as a feminist and as a Christian theologian, comes from setting for herself the task of maintaining radical divine freedom *and* God's radically and asymmetrically distinct identity from her transcendental *and* feminist foundations of knowing, being and 'meaning'. Her panentheistic theology, rising out of an over-arching metaphysical principle, also raises with it a number of questions, including whether her doctrine of the immanent Trinity safeguards divine aseity and if she deals adequately with a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Moreover, does her Christology take seriously the Incarnation as *God* with us and does her God-talk correspond to the language of God's Self-talk? Is God a Subject who *can* speak for Godself as an essential element of

¹⁹⁰ E.g., Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God"; LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 233.

¹⁹¹ E.g., *SWI*; *God For Us* (see n. 191); *Transforming Grace* (see n. 34).

¹⁹² *SWI*, 225, citing Walter Kasper.

'personhood' and 'persons in relation' at the heart of Christian theology? Finally, is her God-talk consistent with the Church's theological speech as possible only through its ontological and epistemic participation in the *koinonia* of the Triune God?

For Barth, these are the critical issues, and it is pertinent to look again at what he has to say about them in this context. This is especially so given that Johnson accuses Barth of presupposing so radical a dissociation between God and human experience, further implying that Barth's God-talk is virtually meaningless since meaning is grounded in human subjectivity (we will take this up in chapter three). This, however, seems to be a weak critique of Barth due to a failure to engage his theology substantively or seriously. In one sense this is surprising, given the overwhelming influence of his theology on all subsequent Trinitarian thought, including Johnson's. Barth also did more than any twentieth-century theologian to challenge the oppressive potential of God-talk at the political level and would certainly be sympathetic to feminist critiques of socio-political oppression under the guise of Christianity.

Two things are true in Christian theology, and as such apply both to Johnson and Barth. First, Christian doctrine and speech prioritise accuracy in thinking about God's transcendence and immanence in creation. We must distinguish conceptually and really between God and human creatures. Otherwise we cannot speak of this as a relation between two radically distinct and, indeed, different 'others'. This belief is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition's belief in the God who spoke to Abraham, Moses and the prophets, and then spoke his own Word in his Being-Act in the human person Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. Second, theology and method are inextricably linked. What we say about God depends on what we believe is possible to say and why, which in

turn influences what we say about everything else. This relation, between knowing and being, is grounded in the divine-human relation as well.

The question is: who has priority? Who sets the criterion for understanding the distinction that exists? Johnson denies the priority Barth gives to God as both the Subject and Object of revelation (and with it Barth's view that *finitum non capax infiniti*). She also rejects Barth's Chalcedonian view of the Incarnation as the place where perfect divine-human distinction and mutuality in relation are held together, opting instead for an abstracted concept of the Trinity.

Hence Johnson has the challenge of arguing that God has ontological priority while giving humankind noetic priority (as an existential experience of grace). From there she must further argue (1) that God does not become subject to our *a priori* categories or noetic capacities, (2) that we can distinguish – *from* our experience – between the finite and the infinite *in* our experience, and (3) that our speech about God is, in fact, analogical, not univocal (that it really refers to God as an Other and not to our self-projections) or equivocal (that it really refers meaningfully to *God* and is not simply agnostic nonsense). Johnson believes this is possible based on her understanding of the *analogia entis* interpreted through the grid of feminist relationality – that we participate in the being of the relational God and that we can speak meaningfully of God out of that experience. She thus develops a panentheistic, relational ontology using metaphysical and Trinitarian categories. From here she argues that God can be best understood and spoken of as SHE WHO IS; *Spirit-Sophia*, *Jesus-Sophia*, and *Mother-Sophia*. These next two chapters follow her attempt to do so.

Chapter Two:

In Relation to the 'Unknowable' God: Johnson's Transcendental Epistemology

In *She Who Is I* I draw on *themes and ideas from Thomas Aquinas* to explore a feminist theology of God. ...I also make *ontological claims* and draw references *about the way things truly are*, but these are *not beholden to any complete metaphysical system*. They *may in truth be compatible* with many systems.¹⁹³

The first purpose of this chapter is to set forth and evaluate the epistemological and ontological claims that Johnson makes based on the rather ambiguous metaphysical approach she describes above. These are set out as an arbitrary set of principles, carefully culled from her various writings, which lie at the heart of her 'theological' enterprise. The ultimate goal of the chapter is to highlight the questions these transcendental principles raise vis-à-vis her feminist worldview and her declared Thomism (for which radical distinction between God and the world is essential). At issue is whether her feminist methodology, outlined in chapter one as establishing the criteria for 'truth', is in fact compatible with either of these systems, or the compatibility of these systems with each other.

I. 'Finitum Capax Infiniti' - Johnson's Transcendental Approach

What might at first be taken for a rather 'relaxed', postmodern approach in the statement above – i.e., the freedom to choose from among different views and concepts to ascertain 'the way things truly are' – is in fact anything but. Johnson's relational ontology and epistemology do not represent a random collection of ideas and inferences. Rather, she presents a carefully constructed worldview based on certain Western feminist and

¹⁹³ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 100-1 (emphasis added).

Rahnerian, transcendental principles.¹⁹⁴ As Johnson notes, these principles are not 'beholden' to any complete metaphysical system – in fact they represent two very different experience-based systems. Both systems, and the principles which govern them, have important implications for Johnson regarding divine-human distinction and the question of freedom that characterise her Christian tradition.

In Johnson's transcendental framework, the most basic 'theme and idea' she draws from Aquinas is the following assumption: *finitum capax infiniti* ("the finite is capable of bearing, or has the capacity for, the infinite"). In an interpretation of the basic ontological relation of the *analogia entis*, Johnson presses this even further to state that female symbols of God are specifically *capax Dei*. Women, in a particular, epistemologically *necessary* way, bear, 'image' and have direct knowledge of the divine mediated through their own experience. Transcendentally, however, Johnson's natural theology presupposes that all human beings are 'spirit in the world' and thus have epistemic access to knowledge of God through their own self-awareness. The basic *theological* structure of this participation in, and thus knowledge of, the divine through human experience is the relation between nature and grace. Put simply, the ontological question is 'How is it that we participate in divine being?', while the theological question is 'What does it mean to be 'graced' as an aspect of our human 'nature'?'

In the most general Thomistic sense, 'grace' is understood as God's gift of the divine life itself bestowed on humanity. Aquinas, however, made a distinction between 'created

¹⁹⁴ Karl Rahner's influence on twentieth-century contemporary Catholic theology (including his positive engagement with liberation and political theology) has been unquestionably profound. In this chapter I am indebted to Paul Molnar's critique of Rahner's transcendental presuppositions in "Can We Know God Directly?" (see n. 20) and "Experience and the Theology of the Trinity": How Karl Rahner's Method Affects His Understanding of Revelation, Grace and the Trinity," in *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In dialogue with Karl Barth and contemporary theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 83-124.

grace' (the change wrought in the individual by the divine presence) and 'uncreated grace' (the inner life of the Triune God). He thus believed the function of grace to be two-fold: To heal human nature from sin and to elevate it to its final goal – union with God through participation in the divine life. Hence, the Catholic axiom 'grace supposes nature' as 'nature supposes grace'. Grace is considered absolutely essential to nature for without it the human person cannot achieve union with the divine. Nature, in turn, supposes grace to the extent and on the assumption that humans have a natural desire for direct union with God. In transcendental terms, we are radically oriented toward infinite or Absolute Being ('God') as constitutive of our human being; no finite reality can satisfy this divine aspiration.¹⁹⁵

Johnson espouses Rahner's transcendental anthropology and epistemology, as follows:

... a human being is primordially 'spirit in the world,' ... dynamically oriented toward fathomless mystery as the very possibility of acting in characteristic human ways.... Human beings are dynamically structured toward God. ... the experience of God which is never directly available is mediated, among other ways but primordially so, through the changing history of oneself. ... Writes Rahner, "The personal history of the experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God"; "the personal history of the experience of God signifies, over and above itself, the personal history of the experience of the self." Each mutually conditions the other.¹⁹⁶

Let us examine how this view, as a set of metaphysical and epistemological principles, under-girds Johnson's relational ontology and makes it possible for her to equate it with Christian trinitarian theology.

A. First Principle: There is general, over-arching philosophy of being and knowing which governs divine and human reality.

What is it that we actually apprehend which leads us ultimately to knowledge of divine and human reality? The short answer is Being. Philosophically, says Johnson,

¹⁹⁵ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 176-182.

¹⁹⁶ *SWI*, 65-6, citing Rahner, "The Experience of Self and Experience of God," *TI* 13:125.

'being' does not belong to any *usual* category of thought. It is an idea *sui generis* that points to the reality that undergirds all else, in virtue of which everything exists. When 'theological speech' adopts this notion to refer to God, 'it signifies that the mystery encompassing the world is more being-ful than all finite creatures combined; in fact, God is the fire of sheer aliveness whose act of being overflows, bringing the universe into being and empowering it to be. This language carries the *companion recognition* that all things are on fire with existence by participation in God's holy being'.¹⁹⁷

Johnson's approach takes its basic form and content from Rahner, who posits that human knowing cannot be separated from human being (hence knowledge and speech about God are grounded in human experience): 'Every possible object of cognition is already anticipated under the general aspect of being'.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, as transcendent beings confronted by and responsible for ourselves, we are also naturally drawn beyond ourselves toward infinite 'Being' with the knowledge that such being is 'God'.¹⁹⁹ Thus

¹⁹⁷ Both quotes from *SWI*, 238. Classic articulations of this ontological equating of 'being' with God-talk are also found in Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963): 163-289, and Robert Scharlemann, *The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth* (New York: Seabury, 1981).

¹⁹⁸ Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 245-6n81 citing Rahner, "Philosophy and Theology," *TI* 6:72. In other words, the general philosophy of being is prior to and grounds the possibility of any and all theological claims. 'There can ... be no existent thing that does not automatically and objectively fit into the context of being in general'. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 96. See also *TI* 9:127-44.

¹⁹⁹ Johnson explains this as the bi-polar structure of human nature. There is an ordinary, objective (categorical) pole and a transcendent (pre-thematic) pole. Our pre-thematic *self-awareness*, she says, is a kind of 'presence to ourselves as a subject that accompanies and undergirds all our thoughts and actions'. This self-awareness is assumed to be awareness of the presence of Infinite Being, as both revealed and concealed. Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 38-41. Rahner, *The Practice of Theology*, 210. In McBrien's words: 'God is not "a" Being separate from the human person. God is Being itself, permeating the person but transcending the person as well ... [thus] there is no standpoint from which we can "look at" God objectively, in a detached manner, as it were. God is always present within us, even before we begin the process, however tentatively and hesitantly, of trying to come to terms with God's reality and our knowledge of God. Accordingly, everything we say about God can be translated into a declaration about our existence. God is a constitutive dimension of our existence. To talk about God is to talk about ourselves'. *Catholicism*, 147. How does the finite person 'know' this infinite presence from his/her own being? According to Rahner, 'A finite system as such can experience itself as finite only if in its origins it has its own existence by the fact that, as this conscious subject, it comes from something else which is not

theology does not govern our epistemology. Rather, natural theology is an inner factor in a general, all-encompassing philosophy of being which governs the 'truth' about God, humanity and their relation.²⁰⁰ Rahner goes on to explain this in terms of the relation of nature and grace inherent in such a view: "[J]ust as the concrete reality of grace includes nature as an inner moment within itself, philosophy is an inner moment of theology, a condition of the possibility of theology."²⁰¹ Grace, first understood philosophically, presupposes nature and creates within it the necessary condition for knowing God

Hence Rahner's neo-Kantian, transcendental reinterpretation of Aquinas' *analogia entis* carries an epistemological emphasis on knowledge as the most distinctive feature of our human life:²⁰² We are 'the ones who know; indeed, we are the ones who know that we know. Consciousness, self-consciousness is the great thing that

itself and which is not just an individual system, but is the original unity which anticipates and is the fullness of every conceivable system and of every individual and distinct subject ... human transcendence is not the experience of some definite, particular objective thing which is experienced along side other things. It is rather a basic mode of being which is prior to and permeates every objective experience'. Taken from *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978), cited in Colin Gunton, Stephen Holmes and Murray Rae, *The Practice of Theology: A Reader* (London: SCM, 2001), 210.

²⁰⁰ As Johnson has previously argued, human thought constructs the *inherently* relational idea of 'being' as the all-inclusive category for reality at large, the 'code word' for creation and for God its source. Nevertheless, she relies on the realities of 'being' and 'God' as 'given' in that they exist prior to and outside of our concepts or language. Johnson does not explain how 'being' itself can 'be' inherently relational as an element of all created reality, animate and inanimate, sentient and non-sentient.

²⁰¹ Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 245-6n81 citing Rahner, "Philosophy and Theology," *TI* 6, 71-82; 72.

²⁰² Geoffrey Kelly explains: 'By seeding Kant with insights from Aquinas, Heidegger and Maréchal, Rahner hoped to avoid the dead-end of Kant's rejection of the possibility of theoretical knowledge of God on the assumption that all human knowledge is rooted in sensible intuition. Hence Rahner answered the Kantian question, and offered a new understanding of Aquinas, by proposing a transcendental understanding of God who is *not known* by man as an *object of reality*, but as the *principle of human knowing* and reality. Kelly summarises, 'Rahner's aim in *theology* is, then, to deepen, enliven, and make explicit the *primal, transcendental relationship* with God in creation and incarnation *that activates* theological awareness and enriches one's *dialogue with the source of all being* and of all theological articulation of the significance of such *relationship*'. *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geoffrey Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 38-9, 156 (emphasis added). One feels compelled to ask how to have a relationship with 'being' as the activating agent of one's own self-awareness? Despite Rahner's and Johnson's 'personal' language for the concept of being as divine mystery, this is not a description of personal encounter between an 'I' and a 'Thou'.

distinguishes us'.²⁰³ Embedded in this principle is the foundational Kantian/neo-Kantian presupposition that the human subject is at the centre of epistemology and revelation, setting the terms for what is both possible and actual in terms of God, humanity and their relation. As Johnson regularly emphasises, 'all of our thinking moves from the world to God and *can never move* in the opposite direction. Revelation, by whatever model it is interpreted, in no way suspends this law, nor does it dissolve the ultimate mystery that is God', whose essential unlikeness to the finite world remains complete.²⁰⁴

The locus of our knowledge of God's transcendence and immanence is our self-experience. The history of such knowledge is our historical articulation of that experience. This assumption is so fundamental that Rahner actually describes theology in terms of one great epistemological moment of self-awareness:

[I]n the case of God possibility and actuality can only be grasped in a *single* act of knowledge. Thus from the point of view of *ontology*, the theology of *creation*, the theology of *grace* and *existence* (and *all four in one*) the question of God can apparently only be stated as one which has necessarily already been asked and which has the answer *in itself* ... Hence at the *same time* the question itself says both that God is, and also who God is ...but only as a question concerning the very ground sustaining the "question" which we ourselves "are".²⁰⁵

This means that the human person is capable of transcending himself or herself in the knowledge of God, to whom his or her whole life is oriented; because 'God' is already present in the person (grace is inextricably bound up in nature).²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Fergus Kerr, "Rahner Retrospective" III – Transcendence or Finitude," in *New Blackfriars* (September, 1981): 370-379; 373.

²⁰⁴ Johnson, "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 111; "The Theological Case for God-She," 10; "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 441; *SWI*, 104-112, and *passim*.

²⁰⁵ Rahner, *TI* 9:127-44 (emphasis added). Rahner goes on to state that God is revealed every time man inquires into *anything* that exists. *Hearers of the Word*, 7-8. Assuming this is so, is God truly free if his essence necessarily arises *only* out of our inquiry?

²⁰⁶ By positing that 'being' or 'Spirit' is a 'given' to be necessarily apprehended as a matter of human experience, Rahner and Johnson both hold to the essential aspect of Schleiermacher's theology, i.e., the claim that all humans (whether or not aware of it) are naturally fitted for an encounter with Infinity: We all possess the capacity for our experience of, engagement with and activity in the world to be shaped by a fundamental intuition of the determination of our being by that which lies beyond it – what Schleiermacher referred to as the Universe, All, the Whole, God, and what Rahner and Johnson refer to as Divine Mystery,

Johnson, too, asserts that human beings are 'dynamically structured toward God'; thus 'the human phenomenon ... cries out for the idea of God as the presupposition of its own intelligibility'.²⁰⁷ Although we directly apprehend divine and human reality from our own self-awareness, this 'apprehension' actually begins at a pre-cognitive level. It is grounded in an unthematic pre-apprehension (*Vorgriff*) of infinite Being as a *constitutive element* of our humanity.²⁰⁸ God is not given to us as a thematized concept, an objective 'substance' of 'being' or a personal 'other'. Rather, we experience God *prior to* God's being 'explicitly named' or objectified within our thematic, conceptual structures. Thus we derive the 'concept from the pre-conception, the name from the experience of the

Infinite Horizon of Being, Absolute Being, 'the Transcendent'. See Trevor Hart's discussion in "Revelation," *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 38-9.

²⁰⁷ With Rahner, Pannenberg and Bultmann, Johnson contends that the question of the legitimacy of God is ultimately a human question and answer. As Bultmann declares, 'Man's life is moved by the search for God because it is always moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the question about its own personal existence. The question of God and the question of myself are identical'. *Christ and Mythology*, 53. Pannenberg argues that it is the reality and 'destiny' of human beings to be images of God. Thus we can conclude, says Johnson, that humans are 'on the way to their goal of full humanity [as image of God] in communion with the all-encompassing God. This goal ... is already constitutive of human existence'. Like Rahner, Pannenberg contends that human beings are in fact 'a phenomenon [creation] of spirit ... Spirit is the presence of power and meaning as a constitutive condition which makes [human being] possible... The concept of spirit, therefore, sums up the *theological* depths of the anthropological phenomenon'. "Legitimacy of the God-question," 300, 302. Interchanging 'Being' with Spirit, Johnson states: 'Wherever we encounter the world and ourselves as held by, open to ... or yearning for something ineffably more than immediately appears ... there the experience of the Spirit transpires'. *SWI*, 139, 124-5. And yet, says Charles Marsh, 'Johnson does not tell us why this dimension of 'more' should be named "Spirit" ... or why modernity's various non-theological and anti-theological accounts of the "more" are not to be preferred'. "Two Models," 62.

²⁰⁸ Here Rahner has brought Maréchal's interpretation of Aquinas in critical dialogue with Kant and Heidegger, positing congruence between Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world and Aquinas' concept of the dynamism of the human mind in making judgments on or about the world. For Heidegger, one attains awareness of the self by posing the fundamental question of being in a sensate world. Using the concept of *Vorgriff* as human pre-apprehension of being, Heidegger contended that the question of human being/meaning must somehow be directed by a *Vorgriff* of the *world's* horizon. Rahner believes that putting that judgment through Aquinas' process of 'abstraction' demands an application of a universal, conceptual form which places the knower into a *real contact* with absolute being, and so he redefines *Vorgriff* to mean the human pre-apprehension of the *infinite* horizon of being ('God'). Kelly, *Karl Rahner*, 7. Fergus Kerr, however, takes issue with Rahner's reinterpretation of Heidegger's original understanding and use of *Vorgriff*, concluding that 'one thing is for sure ... the doctrine of man as transcending his situation in the world towards the absolute which is implicitly God is not a doctrine that comes from Heidegger'. "Rahner Retrospective," 376.

nameless'.²⁰⁹ Human existence is primarily a process of being and becoming under the attractive force of the primal, creative offering of God's own 'self', an offering which is always *dependent* upon the cognition of the human subject to freely recognise and name it.

In terms of the God-world relation or the relation between nature and grace, creation literally becomes the overflow of divine being as it takes finite form; creation derives its symbolic or 'analogical' existence from the pre-existent ground of Being.²¹⁰ Says Johnson, 'God imparts the divine being to created nature: to Jesus in the incarnation and to the rest of humanity in the gift of grace, in radical proximity. God communicates himself (*sic*) in his own person to the creature so absolutely that *no third thing comes between God and the creature*'.²¹¹ Or, as Rahner states: 'If the creation of what is not divine is understood dogmatically at the outset as *a factor and condition* for the possibility of God's absolute self-communication, in which absolute love gives itself and not something other than itself, *creation* as the freely uttered word of the unfathomably incomprehensible is then seen as *the beginning and the "grammar" of the divine self-expression* communicated into the void'.²¹² Humanity becomes the *event* of God's free, unmerited, and absolute self-communication.²¹³

Johnson tries to explain this in terms of the general concept of the *analogia entis*, which operates from an *a priori* of 'efficient causality' ('a production out of a cause'). Traditionally Aquinas' theory of analogical predication rests on an interpretation of the

²⁰⁹ Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *TI* 4:50. 'Naming' or conceptualising God from our experience is a crucial but secondary aspect of our primary transcendental orientation.

²¹⁰ *SWI*, 238.

²¹¹ *SWI*, 239, 206 (emphasis added).

²¹² *TI* 9:127-44 (emphasis added). This, says Rahner, is the beginning of Trinitarian self-revelation, rather than the Incarnation.

²¹³ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

doctrine of creation that sees all things as brought into being and sustained by God as the 'primary cause' of the world.²¹⁴ He argues, 'Whatever is of a certain kind through its essence is the proper cause of what is of such a kind by participation'; hence, as the primary, creating and sustaining Source of being, God gives a share in being to creation as God's 'proper effect'.²¹⁵ Reinterpreting Aquinas' familiar analogy of this relation, Johnson states: '[T]he whole world exists by being lit with the fire of being itself, which people call God. Every creature that exists does so through participation in that fire, the mystery of divine being. The free overflowing of the fire of being who shares this gift with creatures, without necessity or pressure, sets up the relationship of participation'.²¹⁶

Through participation, human creatures share in being as secondary causes, 'moved movers' to whom God gives form and power to act in freedom and autonomy and as agents through whom God also acts in the world.²¹⁷ Moreover, creation – the experience of human beings in particular – is *necessary* for God to symbolically, 'analogously' express himself *as God*.²¹⁸ Citing Rahner, Johnson asserts: 'We exist analogously, in and through being grounded in holy mystery, which always surpasses us.'

²¹⁴ 'Whatever is of a certain kind through its essence is the proper cause of what is of such a kind by participation. ... God alone is actual being through divine essence itself, while other beings are actual beings through participation'. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3, chap. 66.7, cited by Johnson in "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 10.

²¹⁵ Johnson, "Does God Play Dice?" 10-11. Trying to maintain divine-human distinction, she interprets Aquinas to say that God (*esse*) 'creates the world by giving a share in that being to what is other than Godself'. This would mean, however, that ultimate Being somehow creates the world by giving a share of being to what is *other than being*, something she surely does not ontologically intend to say, since all things participate in being in order to *be*.

²¹⁶ Johnson, *SWI*, 114.

²¹⁷ Johnson, "Does God Play Dice?" 11-12. This allows Johnson to claim that even in her transcendental theology, it is not as if God and creatures stood as uncreated and created instantiations of commonly held 'being'.

²¹⁸ 'In itself, the immediacy of God is hidden away in our unthematic subjectivity, but this closeness of God as the ground and goal of human existence as spiritual, self-transcending reality emerges naturally and spontaneously through human experience. Thus we must engage in the task of self-description (as a phenomenology of the Spirit) to bring our unthematic experience to light as existential analogies of being'. Rahner, "The Christian Understanding of Redemption," cited in Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 129.

Holy mystery “always constitutes us by surpassing us and by pointing us toward the concrete, categorical realities which confront us within the realm of our experience. Conversely, then, these realities are the mediation of and the point of departure for our knowledge of God.”²¹⁹ We are fundamentally free and historical in that participation. In fact, freedom, or human transcendence of the world, is realised *only in historical experience*. Fundamentally, historically free in ‘the freedom of the Cause of our own cause’, as we grow in self-knowledge through experience, we also grow in knowledge and experience of God.²²⁰

This means that God’s Being or ‘Spirit’ exists in *real relation* to creation. Correspondingly, human beings exist in mutual inter-relatedness to God and the cosmos as ‘spirit in the world’.²²¹ In this lengthy but revealing quote, Johnson summarises this understanding and makes the necessary link for women which highlights its appeal as a feminist natural theology:

[A] human being is primordially ‘spirit in the world’, that is, an embodied subject whose capacity for radical questioning and free and responsible action reveals that person is structured toward an ever-receding horizon. This capacity shows that human beings are dynamically oriented toward fathomless mystery as the very condition for the possibility of acting in characteristic human ways... Accordingly, the experience of God, which is never directly available, is mediated, among other ways but primordially so, through the changing history of oneself. *Rather than being a distinct and separate experience*, it transpires as the ultimate depth and radical essence of every personal experience ... In the experience of ourselves at these depths, at the prethematic level whence our own mystery arises, we are also grasped by the holy mystery of God as the very context of our self presence. ... [Citing Rahner] “the personal history of the experience of God signifies, *over and above itself*, the personal history of the experience of the self.” Each mutually conditions the other. ... [Women’s conversion is] experienced not as giving up oneself but as

²¹⁹ SWI, 116, citing Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 73. According to Thomistic scholar Battista Mondin, Aquinas holds that on the ontological level participation in the perfection ‘being’ is analogous, where the first analogate (God) possesses being essentially and therefore by identity (not participation) and the second analogate (human) ‘has a limited degree of’ this analogous perfection (though not identical) and is therefore said to participate in it. *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 66.

²²⁰ Johnson, SWI, 65.

²²¹ SWI, 143. See chapters 1-4 of *Foundations of Christian Faith* for Rahner’s discussion of humans as ‘spirit in the world’, as well as John Haught, *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986).

tapping into the power of oneself ... in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God in whose being we participate.²²²

In sum, rather than our personal self-experience 'being a distinct and separate experience' from God, it actually *becomes* our experience of God. In this way, God's 'self'-identity and action are mutually bound and conditioned by the self-identity and personal history of every human being. As Rahner has emphasised, "'in any act of cognition it is not only the *object known* but also the *subject knowing* that is involved. It is dependent not only upon ... the object, but also upon the essential structure of the knowing subject ... they *mutually condition* one another.'"²²³ This is true even and especially when God is the 'object' and human beings are the knowing subjects. God's very existence is given in human existence; hence the history of human self-transcendence is the mutually conditioned history of the self-communication of God to humanity.²²⁴ In short, God is dependent on the created nature of the human subject to make himself known.

The implications of this are enormous for Christian theology, since it reveals an essentially non-'personal' view of God. The experience of God transpires as the ultimate depth of an individual's self-experience (in fact, *every* individual's self-experience). This is not an experience between distinct, separate 'others' – there is no encounter between an 'I' and 'Thou'. God is not the divine 'Other' who creates, speaks with and relationally

²²² *SWI*, 65-67 (emphasis added). Kerr argues, however, that in an effort to show the sufficiency of finitude for living and understanding within our social and physical world, there has been an increasing desire (since Nietzsche and Wittgenstein forward) to move away from this kind of thinking and 'to reclaim humanity from the power of that ancient and enticing idea that we can transcend our situation in the world'. "Rahner Retrospective," 377-8.

²²³ Rahner, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," cited by Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 245.

²²⁴ Furthermore, this connection is so intrinsic that adjustments in the experience of one reality necessarily affect experience of the other. Johnson, *SWI*, 65-6. Rahner, "The Experience of Self and Experience of God," *TI* 13:125.

keeps covenant with humanity, ultimately encountering them in the Incarnation and in the revealing, empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, the 'personal' distinction of the human being is lost. Here the implications are enormous for feminist theology. If, for instance, it were possible to say upon encountering Elizabeth Johnson that one did not have a distinct and separate experience of her apart from one's self-experience, but rather, that experience of Elizabeth Johnson transpired *as* self-experience, would this not imply an ultimate intermingling? The result would be the loss of each person's distinctive and particular 'human being'. It would be logically impossible to determine the difference between them, or to speak of them as distinct, separate subjects (or objects in relation). This distinction, however, is fundamental to the humanity and personhood of each one.²²⁵

B. Second Principle: Grace creates in human nature the possibility for and knowledge of the mutually conditioned, divine-human 'relation'.

What exactly constitutes the *a priori* condition for mutual relation and direct knowledge of God such that human beings become the 'grammar' and 'event' of divine self-utterance in their self-experience? In other words, how does 'grace suppose nature' and 'nature suppose grace' in this context?

For Rahner and Johnson, one must view God and humanity, grace and nature, being spiritual and being human all together because through *creation*, as the locus of the God-world relation, they *are* together. The idea of God's remoteness comes from considering grace as extrinsic to nature or something 'material' that is 'poured into' receptive souls. Hence these theologians seek to restore the intrinsic, 'original unity'

²²⁵ Ironically, in psychology, this pathological phenomenon is central to issues of co-dependence and inadequate child development leading to a host of adult personality disorders.

between God's grace and human existence by reintegrating the 'supernatural' world 'above' with the natural world 'below'. In so doing, they place themselves in direct opposition to the traditional Catholic view of the relationship between nature and grace. In the traditional view, grace is viewed as totally separate from nature and beyond human experience like a superstructure laid very carefully on top of one's conscious spiritual and moral life with as little inter-penetration as possible.²²⁶ The tradition also maintains that apart from grace there is absolutely nothing good in the human being. Although human nature has a *potentia obedientialis* or a natural openness toward God as its destiny, its orientation and openness toward grace is nevertheless inherently negative. Ultimately, this lack of grace in nature is considered to be 'a deprivation because of a decree of God', and/or 'an event in the past (Adam's sin)', and since we only experience ourselves in nature our experience is non-revelatory.²²⁷

Dissatisfied with this view, Rahner argues for a change in the understanding of both grace and nature, a change that Johnson wholly endorses. No longer is 'supernatural grace' viewed as an ontically present but inactive, non-existential 'state of grace' that leaves human beings essentially unchanged as complete, closed systems.²²⁸ Rather, they argue, if Catholic theology considers grace not only to be 'pardon for the poor sinner' but also 'sharing in the divine nature', then the idea of grace as a 'created state' in the order of being cannot be maintained. Grace must not be thought of as separate from nature and thus 'materialistically' given or 'infused' in human nature as a 'physical accident'. Instead, 'uncreated grace' (the essence of grace or the inner life of God) is considered

²²⁶ Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (1964), cited by Kelly, *Rahner*, 96-110.

²²⁷ Nonetheless, humans are justified and can do 'just works' through faith in the Church's teaching of the existence and 'extrinsic' application of grace. *Nature and Grace*, cited by Kelly in *Rahner*, 97-98.

²²⁸ *Nature and Grace*, cited by Kelly in *Rahner*, 101.

part and parcel of the 'gift' of being human.²²⁹ Grace is not external to being human or beyond human consciousness as a superstructure built upon a hypothetical 'pure nature'. Nor is grace separate from God or mediated by anything other than God as Spirit to human beings as 'spirit in the world'. In Johnson's words, in grace we are not dealing with some 'third thing' apart from the inclusive gift of the Spirit. We are 'graced' through participation in God's own gracious being as an element of human selfhood and existential transcendence.²³⁰

Thus grace and nature are united in human experience such that grace is both God's self-communication to us and the 'natural' effects of that communication: 'From the very first this grace cannot be conceived as separable from God's personal love and human beings' answer to it'.²³¹ By positing this relationship between God and the human addressee as a necessary one, God's grace becomes 'the divinizing condition' of a person. As such it presupposes and incorporates into itself (Godself) the whole reality of this person as *the condition of its (God's) own possibility*.²³² Ultimately, '*God in his own proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man*' as grace, which unites itself with nature through the 'supernatural existential' of being human.²³³ What exactly does this mean?

²²⁹ Variations on this same theme can be found in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Herder, 1967); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980); Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Herder, 1971).

²³⁰ Johnson, *SWI*, 214-15, 124.

²³¹ Kelly, *Rahner*, 102.

²³² Kelly explains that somehow, '*while remaining wholly other*, God's presence in grace becomes intertwined with the entire process of the creative transformation of the self'. *Rahner*, 43.

²³³ Rahner, "The Christian Understanding of Redemption," *TI* 21, 250; "A Summary of the Notion of Revelation," in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 170-172; "The Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace" and "The Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in, *TI* 1:319-346, 297-318. Because 'grace' as God's own being is not static and disparate from nature in this view, it does not fall into categories like 'prevenient', 'efficacious', even 'common'. He also absolutely avoids clearly defined moments when grace is accepted or rejected by people or 'making distinctions based on speculation' as to whether a person

In Rahner's interpretation of the *analogia entis*, we are 'naturally' oriented toward God (our *potentia obedientialis*) in that we are radically open to and capable of receiving grace.²³⁴ This radical capacity is 'the supernatural existential' which modifies or necessarily conditions the basic structure of the human person and permeates the whole of their existence and experience, acting as the catalyst toward union with 'the divine'.²³⁵ This is not grace itself, but only God's 'offer of grace', which enables human beings to freely accept or reject grace whether they are conscious of experiencing it *as* grace or not.²³⁶ In other words, as a constitutive element of human being *and* as God in God's self-communication, grace 'supernaturally' transforms the 'essential structure' of the human spirit toward God.

Thus grace modifies nature as a precondition of its own possibility, and nature presupposes grace in its existential reality. This means that human nature is actually

remains in pure nature or fallen nature or whether he or she is elevated to the 'supernatural'. Rather, God is ever present in enhancing one's freedom, uplifting consciousness, provoking awe, unrest, and 'movements of love', all of which lead to a deepening experience of both God and the self. Kelly, *Rahner*, 43.

²³⁴ Barth considers this to fly in the face of the biblical view. The Word of God does not rely in any way on an expectation of finding ready recipients of His gracious offer of forgiveness, suggesting that they can meet God part way in his offer of grace. The doctrines of *sola gratia* and justification by faith through grace assume that God covers the whole distance himself and then meets only opposition. 'When the Word becomes incarnate, the human response is to crucify him in an act of supreme defiance which epitomizes the general truth about man's so-called capacity for God. It is precisely because God can *rely* upon this response that he is able to turn the tables on man and transform his typical act of rebellion and hate into the very fulcrum of his own redemption. Thus, according to Barth, what is required is no mere rejigging or repolishing or repairing of human nature; but rather the crucifixion of the flesh, and the raising up of a new creature'. Trevor Hart, "The Capacity for Ambiguity: Revisiting the Barth-Brunner Debate," *Regarding Karl Barth* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 163.

²³⁵ Kelly calls the supernatural existential a 'short rubric' for humanity's relationship with God by virtue of their human existence as *never apart* from grace. Kelly, *Rahner*, 110. Others argue that this concept is highly unstable, however: 'If the theologian emphasizes the universal aspect denoted by the term *existential*, the concept may easily fall into intrinsicism and become little more than another religious *a priori* [sic] like Schleiermacher's God-consciousness. If one puts forward the supernatural aspect, [it] may easily fall into extrinsicism and become little more than another theological assertion about the transcendence of God's self-revelation'. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 246-7.

²³⁶ Kelly notes, however, that 'Although Rahner insists that this "supernatural existential" is not grace itself, it seems clear that he looks on this aspect of God's impacting on one's being human as a necessary preamble to the actual moment of graced relationship between God and God's people. Hence the term "existential," borrowed from Heidegger, indicates that what God effects in the human soul is intrinsic to the whole structuration of one's humanity'. *Rahner*, 110.

never 'pure'. It is 'nature superformed' (though not necessarily justified) by the supernatural grace offered to it. Thus, grace and nature, God and humanity are united, even 'assimilated'.²³⁷

[I]t is not at all a bad thing that in this analysis of human being as *potentia obediens* [as essentially open to the divine life] there has been no "chemically pure" description of pure nature, but mixed in with it there are traces of elements of historical nature, that is nature possessing grace'. The nature of a spiritual being and its supernatural elevation are not like two things laid one beside the other, or one against the other, which must either be kept separate or the one exchanged for the other. The supernatural elevation of a human being is the absolute (although unmerited) fulfillment of a being ... The "definition" of the created spirit is its openness to infinite being; it is the creature because of its openness to the fullness of reality; it is a spirit because it is open to reality *as such*, infinite reality. ... We experience our nature where we experience grace; grace is only experienced where by nature there is spirit'.²³⁸

Johnson reiterates this concept in her description of Rahner's view of God's trinitarian Self-communication:

Rahner's fundamental insight, worked out in categories of transcendental theology, springs from the Christian experience of Jesus in the Spirit interpreted as the very self-communication of God. In incarnation and grace God imparts the divine being to created nature: to Jesus in the incarnation and to the rest of humanity in the gift of grace, in radical proximity. God communicates himself (*sic*) in his own person to the creature *so absolutely that no third thing comes between God and the creature. Rather, God himself is the gift.*²³⁹

This ultimately goes beyond the concept of the *analogia entis*, which rationally assumes knowledge of God as first cause through 'efficient causality'. Instead, to know God's 'gracing presence' as 'uncreated grace' requires an *a priori* 'quasi-formal causality' as the basis for the entitative modification of the human being. This causal

²³⁷ Contrary to the tradition and the Fathers, Rahner presupposes that the 'conjunction of the Holy Spirit in particular with man is a proper and not merely an appropriated relationship'. Thus grace is not 'accidental' but constitutes humans "as subjects fit to receive the *substantial gift of the divine essence* ... it assimilates man to God's nature considered as the principle of his possession of himself in Trinity; and thus it at once becomes the *causa formalis* of all the properties of man's supernatural elevation." Rahner, cited by Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 238-9. This position is utterly rejected by the tradition (as pantheism) for lack of a necessary God-world distinction.

²³⁸ *Nature and Grace*, cited by Kelly, 104-107. The word *quasi* is meant to remind us that this *forma* remains absolutely transcendent and free despite the necessary 'assimilation' of nature and grace that makes knowledge, conversion and forgiveness possible. Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 240. While Rahner does not see this 'mix' as a problem, Molnar, however, argues that the inability to distinguish between human nature and 'actual nature' (grace) results in the *greatest possible loss* according to Christian tradition – that of divine *and* human distinction. "Can We Know God Directly?" 238.

²³⁹ *SWI*, 206.

concept provides the *formal* basis of the human being's *analogia entis* and the foundation of his/her relation with God.²⁴⁰ It is by quasi-formal causality ('taking up into the ground') that we are essentially enabled to know 'the supernatural mysteries' (e.g., the hypostatic union, the beatific vision, and the supernatural bestowal of grace) in our self-experience. The 'proper affect' of quasi-formal causality is that we are assimilated to 'the Spirit' and thus have a direct apprehension of the divine in this life.²⁴¹ This means that God *needs* an addressee and recipient of his grace to realise himself. As God's self-communication, says Rahner, grace 'must always presuppose as a condition of its own possibility someone to whom it can address itself and someone to whom it is not owed'.²⁴²

Rahner restates this premise from the side of creation: '[T]he creation, considered as the constitution of the non-divine 'out of nothing,' is revealed as the prior setting and condition for the supreme possibility of [God's] imparting himself'.²⁴³ Ultimately, then, mutual conditioning is not a free choice by God but a necessity in order for God to *be* God. Human existence is to *be* in order for God to be which radically undermines the

²⁴⁰ Our 'entitative divinization' allows us to directly apprehend God in this life, bringing 'the beatific vision' into lived experience as a matter of 'created grace' without altering the 'uncreated grace' of God's transcendence, immutability and freedom. Furthermore, argues Rahner, if (a) grace and glory are two stages of the one process of divinization, and (b) as classical theology has always held, in *glory* God communicates God's self to the supernaturally elevated created spirit in a communication not of *efficient causality* (something distinct from God) but rather *the quasi-formal causal communication of God*, then (c) this can also be applied to grace. From here, he claims, 'the bridge to the mystery of the incarnation and the Trinity is easier to find'.

²⁴¹ Molnar argues that this is really no different than the object of one's initial dynamism of spirit which recognizes 'being' in general. "Can We Know God Directly?" 239.

²⁴² "Philosophy and Theology," *TI* 6:73. Molnar discusses the implications of the freedom of grace and of God himself given these assumptions in "Can We Know God Directly?" 245-6n81.

²⁴³ "Christology in the Setting of Modern Man's Understanding of Himself and His World," *TI* 11: 215-29; 220.

concept of autonomy and freedom in relation for either God or human beings *as distinctly* themselves in that relation.²⁴⁴

This lack of distinction is apparently does not present a problem for Rahner: 'There is no particular difficulty for a metaphysics of knowledge in seeing that transcendence ... the natural openness to being as a whole, *is not clearly distinguishable* in reflection afterwards from the supernatural transcendence, by grace, of the Spirit'.²⁴⁵ Neither is it problematic for Johnson, who fully endorses Rahner's transcendentalism at this point. In fact, it is a necessary principle for her own panentheistic, relational ontology. Our existential experience is *essentially* identical to, mutually conditioning and conditioned by God's 'graced' revelation. 'Rather than a distinct and separate experience, [experience of God] transpires as the ultimate depth and radical *essence* of every personal experience'.²⁴⁶ We are 'grasped' by the 'the holy mystery of God' (or 'divine being' or 'Spirit') 'as the very context of our self-presence' at the pre-thematic depths of our own personal 'mystery'.²⁴⁷

While not problematic for Rahner and Johnson on one level, this lack of distinction is nevertheless a serious concern in Christian theology. It is precisely the ability to distinguish between what is God and not God that rests at the heart of the Christian faith. Hence, this ought to be of great concern for Johnson as a Christian and as a feminist. Given her commitment to uphold the value of women's distinction, one would assume that women's particularity would be threatened, either by her universally normative principle or by the idea of God as ontologically indistinguishable.

²⁴⁴ Taken to its limits, is Johnson actually arguing that God was *not* in a truly actualised sense until creation was?

²⁴⁵ *Nature and Grace*, cited by Kelly, 103 (emphasis added).

²⁴⁶ *SWI*, 65.

²⁴⁷ *SWI*, 65.

C. Third Principle: In grace, we are 'always and from the beginning redeemed sinners'.

Since grace is never 'conferred' as a gift separate from human nature nor is human nature and freedom to be conceived of totally apart from grace, Rahner argues that new meaning must be given to the Catholic axiom *simul justus et peccator* based on this existential adjustment.²⁴⁸ If grace and nature are this inextricably bound together, however, is there a place for 'sin' or a 'sinful nature' in this view?

Johnson deals with sin both from a liberal feminist standpoint (in generally systemic terms) and from a natural, transcendental standpoint that again follows Rahner's lead. First, Johnson wholeheartedly endorses the position taken by Catholic feminists regarding human nature, the *imago Dei* and the doctrine of atonement as set forth by Rosemary Ruether in her explanation of the 'necessary' shift from 'otherworldly' to 'this-worldly' redemption:

Feminists reject the classical notion that the human soul is radically fallen, alienated from God, and unable to make any move to reconcile itself to God, therefore needing an outside mediator who does the work of reconciliation for us. Instead the human self is defined through *its primary identity as image of God*. This original goodness and communion with its divine "ground of being" *continue to be "our true nature."* [Despite the seriousness of evil and its human element] ... this does not change our potential for good. We are alienated or out of touch with this potential, but experiences of consciousness-raising ... begin a process of conversion, *getting back in touch with a better self* and reconstructing personal and social relations. An external redeemer is not necessary for this process of conversion, since we have not lost our true self rooted in God.²⁴⁹

Johnson affirms that we are essentially 'good' in our 'graced' nature and are thus inclined toward 'the highest good' (God). In transcendental terms, God leaves us free to follow the strivings of our natural inclination that aims us toward the ever-receding but all-encompassing horizon of divine 'love' and 'goodness' and correspondingly influences

²⁴⁸ As human freedom is always modified and qualified by grace, so too, says McBrien, grace is operative *only insofar* as it interacts with, and radically transforms human nature. *Catholicism*, 183.

²⁴⁹ Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 275. Thandeka articulates this same position from a process standpoint, using the category of grace. 'Intersubjective theology [neo-Schleiermacher] calls our experience of this infinite moment of our life *grace*. Grace is the liberation of the self from the confines of conceptual schemes, socially constructed identities, public policies ... These human-imposed *restrictions of the self* are sin'. "The Self Between Feminist Theory and Theology," 96 (emphasis added).

our own actions.²⁵⁰ Women, however, are still 'getting in touch' with their essential goodness as, through a process of conscientization and conversion, they exercise their freedom as self-determining agents. 'In this situation grace comes ... not as the call to loss of self but as empowerment toward discovery of self and affirmation of one's strength, giftedness, and responsibility'.²⁵¹ Sin, then, is not a human 'condition' but rather 'an exercise in human freedom' *against* God's self-communication of love and mutuality, hence against oneself and others. In short, it is tied to destructive human choices and their systemic consequences.²⁵²

Rejecting Pannenberg's equating the doctrine of sin 'interpreted in a thoroughly Augustinian-Lutheran trajectory' with the 'centrality' of the structure of human existence as 'alien to the mentality of other Christian traditions' and lacking 'the universality of the more basic argument for the legitimacy of God-talk', Johnson opts for Rahner's understanding of original sin.²⁵³ Rahner defines 'sin' and the phenomenon of 'guilt', respectively, as 'an actualization of transcendental freedom in rejection' and 'closing oneself to the offer of God's absolute self-communication'.²⁵⁴ Though we are radically threatened by guilt, we are not subject to 'original sin' as the transmission of the 'moral quality' of Adam's actions, 'whether this be through a juridical imputation by God or

²⁵⁰ Johnson, "Does God Play Dice?" 12-13.

²⁵¹ Johnson, *SWI*, 64. Johnson describes this 'coming into being of suppressed selves' as a 'deeply religious event', an experience of the 'redeeming' God of the oppressed. Johnson follows Valerie Saiving's long-standing analysis that the classical understanding of conversion as 'the process of disowning oneself or divesting oneself of ego in order to be filled with divine grace' does not apply to women. Whereas the pride-filled, ruling male needs 'a decentering work of grace', the marginalized female finds that grace enables her to assert her selfhood and worth.

²⁵² Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Our Companions Enfolded in the Love of Spirit-Sophia: Mariology and the Communion of Saints in the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson," in *Things New and Old*, 84.

²⁵³ Johnson, "The Legitimacy of the God Question," 300-301. Johnson refers to 'other Christian traditions' without identifying them, distinguishing between them or explaining what makes them 'Christian' or not from her frame of reference.

²⁵⁴ Rahner, *Foundations*, 115, 93.

through some kind of biological heredity'.²⁵⁵ In other words, there is no human transmission of personal sin since this would violate and negate both Adam's free, personal transcendence (which by its very nature is non-transmittable) and our own. We are free in our most human moment to choose for or against God's self-communication in/of of grace, because we are 'the event of God's free and *forgiving* self-communication'.²⁵⁶ The supernatural existential establishes the dynamic quality of our 'nature' as open toward God's 'self-communication' *prior to sin*.²⁵⁷

As Rahner explains, our whole spiritual life takes place 'within God's will for our salvation, God's prevenient grace, God's call making itself heard; all this is going on, perhaps unrecognized in our conscious sphere of existence'. Preaching is merely the awakening and making explicit of what is already there in the depths of human beings, not by nature but by grace ... sinners and unbelievers too, as their very sphere of existence which they can never escape from'.²⁵⁸ Because of this, and our freedom to 'transcend' evil, Johnson 'repudiates' the doctrine of atonement as the death of Jesus required by God in repayment of sin, a death that he sought or intended 'in a masochistic desire for victim status'.²⁵⁹ Rather, Jesus' death was contrary to the desire of God; 'an act of violence brought about by threatened human *men*, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God'.²⁶⁰ An 'historical reading' of Jesus' ministry thus indicates that he did

²⁵⁵ Rahner, *Foundations*, 111.

²⁵⁶ Rahner, *Foundations*, 116. Contrary to Barth, as we shall see, Rahner and Johnson claim that when we are at our most 'human' we are utterly free to choose for or *against* God's self-communication.

²⁵⁷ Rahner, *Foundations*, 123.

²⁵⁸ *Nature and Grace*, cited by Kelly, 104-105.

²⁵⁹ Johnson, *Friends of God*, 43; *SWI*, 158. Although 'brokenness and sin are everywhere', and we are all 'equally involved' in it, '[s]uch a view today is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent and sadistic father, reflecting the very worst kind of male behaviour'.

²⁶⁰ Johnson, *SWI*, 158. Harold Wells, who is generally supportive of Johnson's theology, states that this charge overlooks two things: 'First according to these same sources it was Christ who "emptied himself ... and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8), who "gave himself for me"

not 'come to die' in a preordained act of vicarious satisfaction. Instead, 'his execution was part of his free, larger commitment to the flourishing of life in solidarity with others'.²⁶¹ The cross then is viewed as 'a dialectic of disaster and powerful *human* love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost'.²⁶²

If we never exist apart from grace, then even in our sin we remain open to the possibility of God's grace as conversion and forgiveness.²⁶³ The absolutely gratuitous nature of God's self-communication is 'prior to any and every sinful rejection of God by a finite subject' and as such *triumphs* over such rejection.²⁶⁴ This is not merely *forgiving* grace (as a kind of secondary priority) but is the *a priori* grace of God's free love which God makes the intrinsic principle and the 'object' of human actualization.²⁶⁵ In an essay

(Gal. 2:20). What is taught here is the free and willing self-giving of Christ for us. Second, the charge overlooks the unity of Christ with the will of the Father, the deep inner communion of Jesus-Sophia with Mother-Sophia, thus seeming to forget the equality of the divine persons that Johnson has so emphatically asserted and to ignore the *communicatio idiomatum* that she affirms elsewhere'. "Trinitarian Feminism," 341-342.

²⁶¹ Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 49 (1994), 1-18, 15. This view does not consider the possibility of Jesus' free act in the crucifixion because it rejects the possibility of or need for God's free act of atonement. Absent is *any* sense of God's freedom, particularly freedom-in-relation, in the event of the cross. Wells also takes issue with Johnson at this crucial point: 'Does she not run here the danger here of replacing a theology of grace with one of moral admonition? Or is this a theology of easy grace, without wrath or judgment?' "Trinitarian Feminism," 341-342.

²⁶² Johnson, *SWI*, 159 (emphasis added). By contrast, the 'contingent historical narrative' of liberation and political theologies 'discloses the hope that God intends to put an end to all the crosses of history' through his participation in the pain of the world. Nevertheless, the cross remains 'but its symbolic nexus' changes. 'It stands in history as a life-affirming protest against all torture and injustice, and as a pledge that the transforming power of God is with those who suffer to bring about life for others'. "Jesus and Salvation," 15; "The Maleness of Christ," 112. And yet, she does not indicate *how* the transforming power of God is with those who suffer or *how* it brings about 'life'.

²⁶³ The call of God to conversion and forgiveness would be meaningless, says McBrien, 'unless there were some basis in the human person for responding to the call. Grace supposes even in the sinner the capacity to receive it'. *Catholicism*, 182.

²⁶⁴ Rahner, *Foundations*, 123.

²⁶⁵ 'In the one and only concrete, real order of human existence, what is most intrinsic to man is God's self-communication at least as an offer, and as given prior to man's freedom as the condition of its highest and obligatory actualization ... This is so because in the concrete order man is himself through that which he is not, and because that which he himself is, inescapably and inalienably, is given to him *as the presupposition and as the condition of possibility* for that which in all truth is given to him as his own in

on the symbolic nature of Mary as the 'first disciple' whose life is characteristic of 'the Church' as a graced people, Johnson makes the same connections from the same presuppositions:²⁶⁶

Every human being is surrounded from the beginning of life and *before the exercise of freedom* with God's redemptive love and fidelity. God's universal salvific will implies not only a design on God's part but an *actual effect* in human existence which would be different if grace were not so continually offered. ... [In relation to 'original sin'] "sin" refers not simply to a condition that precedes in time the giving of grace, but further to a condition that "coexists dialectically with the offer to human beings of salvation and grace." Human beings always originate from both Adam and Christ, in sin and grace, and have to *ratify one or the other in situations of freedom* – but not as if it were an equal contest. Grace is always and everywhere more powerful than sin. And not as if sin first established itself and grace were given as a subsequent repair – we are "always and from the beginning redeemed sinners."²⁶⁷

If, states Johnson, we are in the realm of Christ's redemption (as an expression of grace) from the first moment of our existence, then simply put, 'grace is more original than sin' and more or less eradicates its effects on our human nature.²⁶⁸ We are nevertheless responsible to act out that grace in ways that eradicate sin's *historical* effects. As we are 'assimilated to' and have direct apprehension of God, we participate in the 'salvific', 'gracious' Being and action of God through our own being and action.²⁶⁹

absolute, free and unmerited love: God in his self-communication'. Expressing this again in terms of nature and grace, Rahner explains that 'God wishes to engage in self-communication, to pour forth the love which God is. That is the first and the last of God's real plans and hence of God's real world too ... God creates human beings ... in such a way that they *can* receive this love ... and that they can and must at the same time accept it for what it is [the unexpected, unexacted gift]. ... As unexacted, not only because they do not deserve it as *sinners*, but further because they can also embrace it as unexacted when, already blessed in this love, *they are allowed to forget* that they were sinners once'. *Foundations*, 123, 124; *TI* 1: 309-17 (1961), cited by Kelly in *Rahner*, 111 (emphasis added).

²⁶⁶ An article of this kind regarding the being and identity of the Church is paradoxical to say the least, when such 'graced nature' and 'being' belongs unconditionally to all of humanity.

²⁶⁷ Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 312-35, 331-32. Here she cites Rahner (emphasis added). In this study Johnson explicitly states that while Mary is a symbol of redeemed humanity, she is not the archetype or prototype. The prototype is 'Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead' (326).

²⁶⁸ "The Symbolic Character," 331.

²⁶⁹ Thus we come full circle back to the inextricable bond between grace and nature, God and humanity, and with it a critical blurring of divine-human distinction. In chapter three we will look more fully at the ramifications of 'salvation' without a theology of atonement.

D. Fourth Principle: Divine 'incomprehensibility' equals Neo-Kantian 'unknowability' and experience of the 'Nameless'.

After arguing for direct apprehension of God through human experience, Johnson simultaneously makes what sounds like a contradictory claim – that God is ultimately 'unknowable'. This fundamental agnosticism is extremely problematic for distinguishing between divine and human reality and identity. Nevertheless, it is also fundamental to Johnson's view of 'naming' the divine. It stems from her Rahnerian presupposition that God is essentially 'nameless'.²⁷⁰ Methodologically, this means that although we always stand directly before God, we do so as before the unknown, 'nameless' ground of Infinite Being. Without question our experience of the 'nameless' is experience of God.²⁷¹ What is at question is how *we interpret* this experience: indeed, whether we interpret this experience *correctly*, thus accurately (however inadequately) explicating our implicit, un-objectified knowledge of the true God.²⁷²

Basically, Johnson and Rahner equate what Aquinas and the Christian tradition describe as 'divine incomprehensibility' (that God is beyond human *understanding*) with

²⁷⁰ Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 230n13.

²⁷¹ 'Because of the finitude of our knowledge in the absolute and infinite breadth of our transcendence, God is the one who is forever unknown ... [God is] the infinite who, in his infinitude, can be known by man only in the negation implied in the ultimate limit of all finitude'. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 83, 81.

²⁷² Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 230. Grace gives us epistemic access to a transcendental revelation of God through our own experience that also corresponds to a rational understanding of God through what Rahner calls 'natural' and 'categorical' revelation (distinguished as such to preserve God's freedom in creation). According to Rahner, categorical revelation is the mediated or indirect revelation that we thematize in our own time and place in history. Categorical revelation takes 'thematic' form in a myriad of 'categorical' ways in history and among these categories is 'Christianity'. Christian revelation, however, is only 'a species, a segment of the universal, categorical history of revelation' though it is 'the most successful instance of the necessary self-interpretation of transcendental revelation'. Johnson and Kelly applaud Rahner for undermining the 'imperialism' and 'theological arrogance' of Christianity's claim that God's revelation began only with Judaism, was limited to the God of Abraham and Jesus and was perfected only in the Christian church. *All* experience is a *primary* mediation of divine presence and absence. Religious communities simply thematize the Spirit's offer of grace through their own diverse narratives and rituals. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 153-61, 170-75. Johnson, *SWI*, 124; Kelly, *Karl Rahner*, 128.

Kantian 'unknowability' (that God is beyond human *knowledge*). The Christian belief that God is essentially greater than we can ever understand is reinterpreted to mean that God is essentially unknowable and ultimately 'nameless' apart from human experience and naming. This move intentionally bypasses even the *possibility* that God has revealed, named and made himself known in human history *as* God through Jesus Christ and the Spirit. In fact, says Johnson, the 'idea of divine *incomprehensibility* is not *watered down* with the advent of God in Jesus Christ'; moreover, it 'would be a serious mistake to think that what the Jewish and Christian traditions confess to be God's self-revelation through powerful acts and inspired words in history removes the ultimate *unknowability* of God'.²⁷³ Though she affirms God's utter transcendence (and immanent presence) as historically central to Judeo-Christian faith, we 'can never wrap our minds completely around this mystery and exhaust divine mystery in words or concepts'.²⁷⁴

Certain Catholic reformists like LaCugna argue that 'it is never altogether accurate to say that God is incomprehensible or ineffable; these and similar words do not so much tell us something about God as indicate the limits of human language and knowledge'.²⁷⁵ Johnson, on the other hand, claims that when it comes to the concept of

²⁷³ Ironically, Johnson defends this interpretation *from* Scripture. *SWI*, 106-107 (emphasis added).

²⁷⁴ *SWI*, 7, 104-105. As historical 'defenders' of this common truth Johnson lists such diverse theologians as Anselm, Luther, Simone Weil and Sallie McFague, comparing as similar things 'Luther's stress on the hiddenness of God's glory in the shame of the cross' as the atoning self-sacrifice for sinful humanity, and 'McFague's insistence on imaginative leaps into metaphor since no language about God is adequate and all of it is improper'. McFague would not consider Luther's language to be inadequate or improper, but false, as any language would be that assumes a *real* knowledge of God, i.e., the Incarnation, or that perceives the human condition as 'sinful' and in need of atonement.

²⁷⁵ LaCugna argues that apophysis and analogy is based on what we *do* know and can say about God, however inadequately, because of God's own self-revelation in human history. From her own interpretation of Augustine and Aquinas she contends that theological concepts, systems, and language about God 'must correspond to the fact that we do know the essence of God, though always indirectly, by means of the manifestations of God's being in the works of creation and the personal self-revelation of God in Christ and the Spirit'. *God For Us*, 332.

God as mystery, then (per Augustine) '*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*'.²⁷⁶ Revelation is the history of a deepening awareness of God as incomprehensible mystery. Revelation does *not* mean that mystery is overcome by gnosis 'bestowed by God'. God's *unveiling* is always a simultaneous, historically conditioned *veiling*, which is not from capricious hiddenness on God's part or as a result of the sinful condition of humanity; rather it is proper to God as 'wholly other'.²⁷⁷ Even Aquinas, she claims, did not consider 'the situation brought about by what is referred to as divine revelation' to alter this essential 'unknowability'.²⁷⁸ Even 'and especially in' revelation he considered God to be 'blessedly present but conceptually inapprehensible, and so God ... outside all classes and categories and finally beyond the possibility of being imagined or conceived'.²⁷⁹

Interpreting Augustine, the Fourth Lateran Council and Aquinas as all saying the same thing, Johnson explains that God is ultimately *nameless* since no name can truly express the divine nature.²⁸⁰ In defense of speaking of the nameless God on the basis of

²⁷⁶ *SWI*, 105.

²⁷⁷ *SWI* Following Barth's language of God's being as veiled and unveiled, Rahner argues that incomprehensibility is not *one of* but *the* attribute of God's attributes. Johnson echoes this by stating that God as mystery is not something to be cleared up but rather it 'belongs to the very essence of God as God so to be'. See Rahner's own discussion in *Foundations*, 44-89; and "The Human Question of Meaning in the Face of the Absolute Mystery of God," *TI* 28: 92, 94. This understanding of God's being as essentially veiled from human comprehension for Barth, however, does *not* mean that God is unknowable. In God's unveiling in Jesus Christ, God has freely determined *to be known* and to elect humanity for himself and himself for humanity. Here he has spoken his definitive Word in, as and among humanity – that God *with* us is God *for* us. This knowledge of God in Jesus Christ leads us to knowledge of true humanity as well. Johnson and Rahner use the term veiling to constitute unknowability, which seems to depend on human self-knowledge as the vehicle for assuming toward (?) or 'knowing' God.

²⁷⁸ Aquinas states that even when we 'see' God in heaven, God's actual, infinite, incomprehensible being will be beyond our created understanding. Johnson, *SWI*, 109.

²⁷⁹ *SWI*, 105, 109.

²⁸⁰ Thus she contends that the Christological and Trinitarian formulations of the first ecumenical councils mistakenly gave the impression that revelation cleared up pre-Christian ignorance rather than maintaining God's *essential* incomprehensibility (i.e., unknowability). Augustine supposedly highlighted the inadequacy of dogmatic, creedal assertions by insisting that all speaking of the ineffable God must be born out of silence and ignorance and return there. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) emphasised that "between Creator and creature no similarity can be expressed without implying that the dissimilarity between them is ever greater." This understanding received "paradoxical clarity" in the thirteenth century concept of theological speech, not as univocal or equivocal, but analogical, finding its paradigmatic

transcendental Thomism, she interprets Aquinas' *via analogia* to be characterized 'by a powerful apophatic element, a theological agnosticism more pervasive than has usually been acknowledged'.²⁸¹ Even for Aquinas, she declares, 'the situation brought about by what is referred to as divine revelation' does not change the agnostic character of human speech about God. Even when speaking of the Trinity, our knowledge and language proceed 'under the sign of not-knowing' that she interprets Aquinas to have laid down earlier in *De Deo Uno*. This is 'true for all human knowing of divine mystery, whether that knowledge arises from traces of God in creation or from the revealed word'.²⁸²

What we receive from early Christian theology, then, 'is a pattern of positive affirmation coupled with agnosticism of definition, both essential to the truth of God'.²⁸³ Though she admits that 'revelation gives certain key images not attainable through natural reason, as well as the gift of a clearer intellectual light by which to understand them, it does not unveil the divine nature or give human words precision: 'Even in faith

expression in Aquinas. Johnson, *SWI*, 106-109, 113, 115, citing Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.4.7., 'DS 806' found in *The Christian Faith: in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, ed. (New York: Alba House, 1981), 109, and *Summa Theologiae* I q. 12-13.

²⁸¹ *SWI*, 108-109.

²⁸² *SWI*, 109-110. This interpretation, however, ignores Aquinas' argument that the Trinitarian names are actually 'proper' names given by God and not subject to the same rules of analogy when speaking of God in his unity. In *De Deo Uno* Aquinas contends that how we name God in his unity corresponds with how we know God from reason and the natural world (such that knowing precedes naming). In *De Deo Trino*, however, he argues that we cannot know God on this basis. By natural reason we can only know what belongs to the unity of the essence, not what belongs to the distinction of the persons. Aquinas goes on to assert that the divine names Father, Son and Spirit derive from God's *nature*, not God's economic Self-revelation (though he presupposes this revelation from Scripture). In other words, the persons and their names belong to God '*in divinis*'. They are given to us *by God* in his revelation and *known* by faith as a *way of knowing* what is otherwise unknowable 'from below'. *ST*, Ia q.32, A.1.

²⁸³ *SWI*, 111. She makes this assertion despite, for instance, that while Aquinas exclaims in the *Summa* that 'God surpasses the power of a limited intelligence by very excess of truth', he nonetheless prefaces this statement with the claim that God is 'in himself supremely knowable'. Johnson cites Maimonides (*De Potentia* 7, 5) as a 'marvellous illustration' of how negation evokes a sense of the unknown God. Yet it is precisely at this point that Aquinas seriously criticises Maimonides' negative theology in favor of the *via analogia* which he claims prevents God-talk from bordering on or blending into agnosticism by following any negation with a supereminent 'yes'. As Thomistic scholar Mondin emphasises: 'It is ...clear that in Aquinas the negative way is not a form of agnosticism but a way of expressing the transcendence of God's perfection, which is recognized to be beyond any concept many may form either from material or spiritual beings'. *The Principle of Analogy*, 99. *Summa Theologiae* I, 13, 2.

we remain united to God as to an unknown'.²⁸⁴ This leads Johnson to summarise Aquinas as positing that 'Ultimately, the highest human knowledge about God is to know that we do not know, a negative but entirely valid knowing pervaded by religious awareness' which Johnson and Rahner refer to as the 'burning experience of agnosticism'.²⁸⁵

Such negation does not lead to an agnostic void but simply to an 'agnosticism of definition'. Since God is 'given' as an element of human being/knowing, this negation, argues Johnson, compels human affirmation to transcend itself toward its term, transcending self-awareness to awareness of the divine: God who always ever greater, divine mystery beyond knowing and naming. Returning to Rahner's transcendental concepts of *Vorgriff*, she argues that this 'knowing' is accomplished 'in a judgment of the human spirit that affirms God to be inconceivable while at the same time intuiting that the perspective opened up by the intelligible contents of a concept gives a view of God that is trustworthy ... God is darkly surmised while remaining in essence *conceptually inapprehensible*'.²⁸⁶ Moreover, divine 'inapprehensibility' is at the heart of theology insofar as it is the very condition for the possibility of the human spirit's self-

²⁸⁴ *SWI*, 110. Johnson does not tell us, however, what those key images are, or how, in her theology where reason and revelation are two sides of the transcendental coin, 'revelation' (grounded in human self-awareness) can give clearer intellectual light than human rationality (also grounded in human self-awareness!). Perhaps we are to assume that her interpretation of *Sophia* is one of those key images.

²⁸⁵ *SWI*, referring to Aquinas, *In Boethius de Trinitate* 1, 2, ad 1; *De potentia* 7, 5, ad 14. Some of her Thomistic contemporaries disagree. Francis Martin specifically argues against Johnson's presumption that the theologians she cites share her equation that 'incomprehensible always means completely unknowable' is something that contradicts the witness of believers. He goes so far as to say that her use of the notion of incomprehensibility 'is like that of Lindbeck's Crusader who proclaims *Christus est Dominus!* while splitting an infidel's skull – the phrase is correct, but its actual use falsifies it'. Martin, *TFQ*, 263. We would also ask how it is, if Johnson ultimately affirms that she knows that she cannot not know divine being, that she can write a book about 'the right way to speak about God' (*She Who Is*) and argue her case from a 'truthful' transcendental feminist anthropology that assumes a direct correlation between human knowing and divine and human being?

²⁸⁶ *SWI*, 114 (emphasis added). We 'intuit' being in general 'from wonder that anything exists at all' and the 'metaphysical shock' of realising the possibility of 'nonbeing' (237). Here Johnson also states that our concept of God confesses the incomprehensibility/unknowability of holy mystery. Such talk of an 'inapprehensible concept' is not only ironic given Johnson's rather creative anti-realist position but seems logically impossible. How we can construct a concept that is *inherently* beyond our apperception?

transcendence in knowledge and love. Without the incomprehensible God as the horizon and ultimate fulfillment, 'the human project itself would meet an impenetrable limit such that the human spirit would shut down, having no further depths to plumb'.²⁸⁷

E. Fifth Principle: Positing God as Nameless, Unknowable Being safeguards God's radical otherness while God is simultaneously experienced as an element of human existence.

Johnson ceases to hold with the traditional view of 'no real relation' between God and the world (foundational to Aquinas' understanding of the *analogia entis* and *via analogia*). Here 'classical theism' contends that the world exists always and everywhere outside of divine being – making panentheistic, mutual indwelling an ontological impossibility.²⁸⁸ Though she appreciates the non-coercive aspect of divine freedom inherent in this doctrine, Johnson finally rejects Christian theism at this point, stating that 'no amount of explanation suffices to overcome the instant and deep impact on the human spirit today of talk about God who has no real relation to the world'.²⁸⁹ God's freedom in this way simply fails to be theologically compatible with an *a priori* of mutual interrelation as the most foundational reality of all.

Nevertheless, Johnson acknowledges that she must develop a theology of the God-world relation that keeps a radical, asymmetrical distinction between them if she is to remain in continuity with the Christian tradition. Hence she turns again to the concept of 'incomprehensibility as unknowability' – even in faith we remain united to God as to an unknown (despite our mutual, panentheistic interrelation!). She posits that if God ultimately cannot be known, or understood, then it is because God is radically 'Other',

²⁸⁷ SWI, 111.

²⁸⁸ SWI, 230.

²⁸⁹ SWI, 227.

and vice versa. She supports her claim philosophically and theologically by tracing what she considers the compatibility of the idea of divine incomprehensibility with 'otherness' in early Greek philosophy and the biblical tradition. The philosophical idea of God's inaccessibility to human conceptualisation is 'rooted in the idea that the origin of all things *must be totally different* from the everyday world of multiplicity and change. Because finite and transitory structures cannot be traced back to their origin, the incomprehensibility of the one source is assured. *This affirmation of radical otherness* became wedded to Christian thought regarding the unknown God still present in the world and history'.²⁹⁰ By making the following affirmation, Johnson believes she safeguards God's transcendence even while experiencing God in her self-experience:

The holiness and utter transcendence of God present throughout all creation has always been an absolutely central affirmation of the Jewish tradition and its grafted branch, Christian faith. God as God, ground, support, and goal of all, is illimitable mystery who, while immanently present, cannot be measured, manipulated or controlled. The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility or hiddenness is a corollary of this divine transcendence. In essence, God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total. Hence human beings simply cannot understand God.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ *SWI*, 107 (emphasis added). Johnson draws support for this position both from Rahner (*Foundations*, 75-89) and Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ*; and "God as Person(al)," in *A Personal God? (Consilium 103)*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel (New York: Seabury Press, 1977). Schoonenberg emphasises the relation between the scholastic concept of participation and modern forms of pantheism. As Rahner discusses the concept of 'radical distinction' between absolute Being and 'creatureliness', however, there are points of seeming contradiction considering his assertions that creation is the necessary and mutually conditioned grammar of God's self-utterance. Furthermore, his philosophical discussion arguably 'categorises' God as the infinite, absolute Ground who supposedly fits 'no categories'. It is the category of finite 'creatureliness' that *presupposes* radical difference *and* radical dependence on God from the side of creation, and, by these same principles, presupposes that God as absolute and infinite *must* be absolutely different. In short, Rahner sets the categorical parameters and conditions for God's 'non-categorical' otherness based on his *a priori* ontological principles – because God is infinite Ground and thus 'independent' of creation, God *must* be radically, unknowably 'other' or God would be the object of our knowledge and comprehension. Objective knowability does not fit the conditions of the category of absolute Ground, so even as we name and objectify God through our metaphysical and conceptual reflection, God's difference is insured according to his over-arching principle of causal relation. 'As a spiritual person, man implicitly affirms absolute being as the real ground of every act of knowledge and of every action, and affirms it as mystery. This absolute, incomprehensible reality, which is always the ontologically silent horizon of every intellectual and spiritual encounter with realities, is therefore always infinitely different from the knowing subject. It is also different from the individual, finite things known. It is present as such in every assertion, in all knowledge, and in every action'. *Foundations*, 77.

²⁹¹ *SWI*, 104-105.

In short, by (paradoxically) categorically asserting that God is outside all categories, Johnson grounds her claim that God is 'radically other'; asymmetrical related to but distinct from creation. She agnostically asserts that what she cannot ultimately 'know' in a Kantian sense must be God, and 'God' automatically 'escapes' her thematizing or categorising. The assumption of this infinite, qualitative difference between God and the world is foundational to her methodology and relational ontology: 'I stretch the Thomistic pattern into the shape of panentheism, while maintaining its presupposition of God's otherness'.²⁹²

Meanwhile, however, experience or awareness of God is so foundational that it is considered concomitant with one's self-experience or self-awareness. This primordial human experience of God's 'radical otherness' coupled with a fundamental agnosticism about this experience creates the possibility – even the necessity – of interpreting this experience in multiple ways. And yet, this is precisely where Johnson begins to run into difficulty in her approach.

II. *Problems with Appealing to 'Experience'*

The first section of this chapter outlined the transcendental principles that Johnson relies on in her theology of experience. As we will observe in the next chapter, she tries to wed these to her feminist relational principles in order to describe the God-world relation in female, panentheistic terms. In the remainder of this chapter, however, we will show how Johnson's transcendental theology actually comes into conflict with her feminist principles. Though the latter also support a theology of experience, they do so based exclusively on *women's gender* rather than the all-inclusive category of *human*

²⁹² "Review Symposium," 343.

experience. This creates an inherent contradiction in Johnson's approach. She also continues to face critical questions of distinction as she appeals to 'concomitant experience' of both God and women, as we shall see.

A. Conflicting Appeals

Gendered v. Transcendental 'Experience'

With such a thoroughgoing transcendental epistemology, it is ironic that Johnson would begin her relational ontology/doctrine of God by arguing (1) for the *right* way to speak about the 'mystery of the God recognizable within the contours of the Christian faith',²⁹³ using (2) a particular 'interpreted' experience of 'conversion' (women's self-affirmation as *imago Dei*), and, (3) most significantly, by appealing to a particular *gendered* experience as the source, criterion and validation of 'the way things truly are'.

Johnson acknowledges, at the beginning of *She Who Is*, the tremendous difficulties that she faces in developing a feminist doctrine of God and God-talk – difficulties that are inherent in her reformist agenda:

This project is fraught with complexity. Not only is the referent of the word God utterly incomprehensible, the fathomless mystery that surrounds the burning mystery of our own lives, so that it is impossible to do justice to the subject. Not only are Scripture and tradition historically ambiguous monuments to patriarchy's view of its own rightness, so that the contribution of the Christian heritage cannot be simply presumed or easily retrieved while at the same time it continues to be a source of life for millions. But women's interpreted experience is as diverse as concrete women themselves so that "the" perspective of women is not a unity nor immediately to hand.²⁹⁴

This appears to be so severe (and ultimately so self-contradictory) that one wonders how Johnson believes God-talk of *any* kind to be possible. Here are her assumptions: (1) That the referent we name from our experience is utterly incomprehensible; (2) That Scripture and tradition, Christianity's historical sources and

²⁹³ *SWI*, 8.

²⁹⁴ *SWI*, 10, 29.

criteria for knowing and naming that referent, are 'ambiguous monuments' in need of reform (despite being the source of life for millions); (3) Scripture and tradition are to be rejected because they represent patriarchy's view of its own 'rightness' *based on (inadequate) male experience*; (4) Women, on the other hand, are in the position to judge this as 'wrong' based on the 'rightness' of *their own experience*; (5) Women's experience is not uniform, however, and so cannot in fact be used universally to refer to God or to draw inferences about women's ontology or existential experience.²⁹⁵

Johnson holds these assumptions loosely, however, or uses them to her advantage when she deems it necessary. Ultimately, however, when it comes to experience as the epistemological source of divine reality, Johnson reveals that *some experience is valid and some is not*. This is the fundamental assumption of feminist hermeneutics. On the other hand, Johnson has made abundantly clear that to be *human* is to experience the divine, and to name one's experience is to name 'the wholly other, blessedly present but conceptually inapprehensible' (who is also the God of the Christian faith!)²⁹⁶ This raises numerous problems. How can she have *both* a feminist *and* a transcendental anthropology and epistemology when the appeal to gendered experience judges *certain* transcendental experience as invalid for knowing and speaking of God?

When delineating her anthropological position, Johnson considers herself an essentialist.²⁹⁷ In short, she repudiates any claims to an ontologically gendered 'type' of

²⁹⁵ Hence Francis Martin asks what reformists like Johnson fail to ask in the form of self-critique: 'If the text itself, or the traditional interpretation of it, is the product of a totalising and power-laden form of discourse, where is the norm by which this new understanding can prove itself to be free from the same kind of power-discourse? May it not be a means by which a new elite, through the use of power, imposes itself on the rest of humanity, even in the name of liberation?' "Feminist Hermeneutics," 123.

²⁹⁶ *SWI*, 67, 105.

²⁹⁷ Serene Jones classifies Johnson among those feminists who rest on the 'rock' of essentialising methodology by employing a universalising and/or ahistorical frame of reference to structure accounts of human experience. "Women's Experience Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and

human being but rather makes a *transcendental* appeal to an essential humanity. Each individual is constituted by multi-polar variables (physical, social, historical, etc.). In this model, Johnson claims to be 'loath to stereotype any characteristic as intrinsically masculine or feminine'. She further acknowledges that it is 'short-sighted' to single out sexuality or gender as more fundamental than any of the other constants that make up the 'multi-polar identity' of a human being and claims to reject an ideal *homo* in favour of 'diverse ways of being human'.²⁹⁸

Thus, there is both a *transcendental appeal to essential humanity*, and an *appeal to the transcendental human experience of the divine* as constitutive of each person's essential and existential humanity. By making a *transcendental* appeal when arguing for an essential humanity and access to the divine, Johnson objectifies as 'common' certain ontic and noetic possibilities as constitutive of *all* human experience *as* human. As such, the transcendental appeal is not to any actual *description of* experience but to the *conditions of its possibility* as a universal, 'human' experience.²⁹⁹ For her then to use the term to make claims for a unique *kind* of transcendental experience through gendered appeals appears suddenly to make 'transcendental' experience private, self-contained and immune from justification.

This is unavoidable, however, given the priority of Johnson's commitments. For, despite her essentialist claims, she strives to make theological, sociological and structural reforms as a feminist *first*. Thus, she is compelled to look for an ideal *homo* of 'human

Mujerista Theologies in North American," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 34. Johnson agrees with Jones's assessment in "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 95, noting that it is motivated by 'common sense concerns for justice'. Such essentialist claims come under the most severe criticism from postmodern, post-structural and 'context-specific' feminists. Chopp, "Theorizing Feminist Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology* (see n. 126) 223.

²⁹⁸ *Women, Earth*, 25; "The Maleness of Christ," 111.

²⁹⁹ See George Schnier's discussion of the same in "The Appeal to Experience," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 40-59, 51.

beings' as a model for restructuring relational communities; but it is not based on women and men together. Rather, she considers women's '*moral development and psychology; women's ways of knowing; women's ways of loving; women's ways of living bodily*' to be marked specifically 'by an *intrinsic connectedness quite different from the male ideal* in classic and contemporary culture'.³⁰⁰ The Western male ideal is '*deficiently human*' while women's patterns of affiliation and mutuality (i.e., that which is consistent with divine being) are '*constitutive of their existence*'.³⁰¹ Women's *experience* is given primacy as 'constitutive of the mature person'. Hence gender and sexuality become value-laden, despite all 'essential' or 'transcendental' claims to the contrary.

This goes far beyond women's 'ways of being' as socially constructed. Johnson borders on making ontological claims about female 'goodness' that supersede the inherent *human* goodness presupposed in her natural theology.³⁰² By positing a 'better' *kind* of human being, and putting herself in a position to judge the essential 'goodness' of another, Johnson recreates the most insidious form of sexism – one based on a claim to *ontological* superiority.³⁰³ Despite Johnson's claim that by grace we are all intrinsically, transcendently open to divine mystery in a way that is concomitant with *all* self-experience, men's self-understanding and relationality is finally considered to be distorted. Hence men are dependent on women for what is *not intrinsically* available to them. Their difference is not only 'wrong', but they are necessarily and relationally subordinated to women's ontological and existential reality and epistemic access to

³⁰⁰ *SWI*, 68, 71. Here Johnson echoes Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1976).

³⁰¹ Johnson, *SWI*, 68, 225 (emphasis added).

³⁰² Angela West beautifully exposes this assumption in *Deadly Innocence*.

³⁰³ Daphne Hampson is explicit: 'Feminists claim that their way of conceiving reality, their way of understanding the self in relation to others, is ethically superior to the oppositional stance of male thought and behaviour' (*Theology and Feminism* [Oxford, Cambridge, MA: 1990], 150).

'truth'. Does this mean that their nature, as transcendental awareness and self-experience, is not *graced*?

As Johnson develops her relational ontology, she makes two significant claims: (1) 'In the perspective I am delineating two options are ruled out: reverse sexism, which would place women in dominant positions to the diminishment of men, and a sameness, which would level out genuine variety and particularity, disrespecting uniqueness;³⁰⁴ and (2) 'Discourse about God from a perspective of women' experience ... prizes a genuine dialectic between God and the world that safeguards difference while preserving connection'.³⁰⁵ Johnson is obviously aware of the disastrous effect it would have on her reformist efforts to accuse Christianity of sexism and then perpetuate a reverse sexism as the new 'subject'.³⁰⁶ And yet, in her use of dominating principles, has Johnson avoided this problem? By giving ontological and epistemological priority to women's gendered experience, does she not place their experience in a dominant position?

Johnson argues that only by stripping Trinitarian theology of its 'masculinity'³⁰⁷ will the Triune 'symbol' provide an ethical model for human community, relationality and ethics. While she opts for female language to balance out men's assumedly gendered, transcendental self-experience (traditional God-talk), she claims that this not an

³⁰⁴ *SWI*, 32.

³⁰⁵ *SWI*, 226.

³⁰⁶ *SWI*, 28, 32, 54-56.

³⁰⁷ Including that of Jesus - Johnson appeals to his generic 'humanity' while ironically arguing for women's gendered distinction. Cf. "The Maleness of Christ." Catholic theologian Nancy Dallavalle argues that Johnson's gendered image for God both undermines her argument for one essential human nature and perpetuates the 'divine gender' problems her Christology seeks to negate: 'Since she has clearly and correctly rejected the hypostatic "leakage" of Jesus' biological sexuality to Christ, ... Johnson muddies her argument when she invokes Sophia as a kind of corrective complement for Jesus' human maleness, a characteristic she has already dismissed as irrelevant to the argument'. "Neither Idolatry Nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology," *Horizons* 25/1 (1998): 25-27 (emphasis added). As Fulkerson asks Johnson: 'By posing "She Who Is" do we really move beyond gender binaries? Or do we simply move beyond the obvious subordination of the feminine to the masculine, thereby creating two competing (binary) equals?' See Fulkerson's review of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, in *Religious Studies Review* 21 (January 1995): 23.

'either/or' but a 'both-and', 'equivalent' choice. Male metaphors are not inherently bad, 'for men too are in the image of God and may suitably serve as finite beginning points for the reference of God'.³⁰⁸ Exclusive use of traditionally Christian Trinitarian language (specifically Father, Son and Holy Spirit), however, forms a 'stranglehold'. It becomes a literal, patriarchal, 'graven image, *a finite representation set up and worshiped as if it were the whole of divine reality*'.³⁰⁹ Such speech 'fails both human beings and divine mystery'. It is 'an idol' that perpetuates the devaluation and marginalization of women as less than co-bearers of the *imago Dei* (and explicitly *not capax Dei*).³¹⁰

All of Johnson's assumptions are summed up in her defense of her gendered name for 'divine being':

'SHE WHO IS: *linguistically this is possible; theologically it is legitimate; existentially and religiously it is necessary* if speech about God is to shake off the shackles of idolatry and be a blessing for women ... With this name we bring to bear in a female metaphor all the power carried in the ontological symbol of absolute relational liveliness that energizes the world'.³¹¹

Despite Johnson's affirmation of equivalent images, she argues that 'extended theological speaking about God in female images' are a 'condition for the very possibility' of equivalent imaging given that the scales have been historically weighted in one direction for so long. In other words, female imagery needs *to dominate our idea of God* until such time as we create a conceptual 'balance', the by-product of which will be

³⁰⁸ *SWI*, 33.

³⁰⁹ *SWI*, 39-40.

³¹⁰ *SWI*, 18-19, 36. According to Grace Jantzen's definition, "idolatry" is always a name assigned by an outsider, as opposed to what is seen to be happening by the worshipping group. She also correctly notes that 'to identify something as an idol, it is necessary first to know what God is. From a feminist perspective, the obvious question is who decides what is or is not divine and by what criteria'. "Idolatry," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 148. Ironically modern feminism also claims along Kantian lines that God cannot be 'known' and so generally judges 'divinity' by ethical criteria.

³¹¹ *SWI*, 243. Incredibly, this promotion of a gendered ideal is precisely what she accuses classical theism of affirming in her negatively *gendered* critique: 'Is this idea of [the independent God] not the reflection of patriarchal imagination, which prizes nothing more than unopposed power-over and unquestioned loyalty? Is not the transcendent, omnipotent, impassable symbol of God the quintessential embodiment of the solitary ruling male ego, above the fray, perfectly happy in himself, filled with power in the face of the obstreperousness of others? Is this not 'man' according to the patriarchal ideal?' *SWI*, 21.

relational transformation. For 'only if God is so named, only if the full reality of women as well as men enters into the symbolization of God ... can the idolatrous fixation on one image be broken and the truth of the mystery of God, in tandem with the liberation of all human beings and the earth, emerge for our time'.³¹² In short, Johnson defends the value of her approach by appealing to a dominating reverse sexism as universally necessary for the moral good as it connects to the Absolute Good. While she does at least acknowledge that female imagery does 'not necessarily lead' to her ideals since it too can become idolatrous over time, in her judgment, the 'benefits outweigh the dangers'.³¹³

However, if knowledge of the divine is made on the basis of a transcendental appeal, then she cannot also claim that historical Christian doctrine is 'incorrect' on this basis since it derives from the transcendental conditions of *all experience*, which *de facto* includes the experience of the (male) historical community. 'Experience' and 'community' coincide at this point. The appeal to experience is an appeal to the community and its tradition or inherent structure. Doctrine could only be denied if the transcendental conditions are denied. In George Schner's study of the different types of appeals to experience in theological discourse, he points out that this would not only involve 'the contradiction of denying what one is using for the denial', but it also fails to remember 'the social, mediated and linguistic character of the kind of consciousness' to which Johnson is actually appealing.³¹⁴

The Ambiguous, Experiencing 'Self'

³¹² *SWI*, 56.

³¹³ *SWI*, 45.

³¹⁴ "The Appeal to Experience," 52.

Despite Johnson's continued emphasis on relationality, she maintains a foundational reliance on some form of the modernist 'Cartesian self' when she speaks of women in her transcendental anthropology.³¹⁵ She underscores that it is the *autonomous* female 'self' who is in relation and who determines her own self-reality and identity as well as the conditions of her relational 'world'. This epitomizes the modern sense of the knowing and experiencing subject who is simultaneously an object for its own self-reflection and self-determination and 'identity'.³¹⁶ 'Identity' becomes a matter of 'self-talk' which, concomitantly, is a matter of divine identity and God-talk.

This means that the female self, on the one hand, is understood to be ontologically, necessarily and interdependently related to God and the rest of the cosmos, while, on the other hand, she has the capacity (1) to be an object to herself, (2) to apprehend within her own self-awareness the Nameless mystery of relational being which is *essentially unlike* her, (3) to recognise that this mystery is the 'God' who created her and who exists in mutual coinherence with (while asymmetrically distinct from) her, and

³¹⁵ In *Changing the Subject* (see n.10), Fulkerson critically analyses this view of the modern self and wholly rejects the notion in favour of a poststructuralist understanding of the intersubjective character of self-knowledge and its roots in social location. Noting feminism's unique emphasis on relationality and particularity that extends this basic liberal notion of the self, Fulkerson nevertheless criticises the inherent modernist appeal to an 'essential woman' that transcends all particularities. Even in anthropological theories like Johnson's that seek to be 'multipolar' (integrating but not merging these particularities), the assumption is that there is a neutral, universal referent 'woman' who experientially shares with other 'women' a common 'humanity' and experience of oppression. Fulkerson states this Cartesian notion of self-knowledge not only avoids 'the theological wisdom that holds the self to be mired in self-deception, but such a view *is* the Cartesian subject' (27). Anthony Thiselton also emphasises that Christian wisdom includes an account of human nature that 'accepts the capacity of the self for self-deception and its readiness to use strategies of manipulation'. *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 13. For Barth, this is definitive of the human condition in need of grace which makes impossible the discernment of truth through natural means.

³¹⁶ In other words, the female subject becomes her own self-referential 'passive object of reflection' and her 'self-knowledge' is the attempt to describe an accurate mimesis of her true self. 'As she reflects upon herself, the subject grasps her own identity. The subject has as an object of knowledge some idea or representation that is taken to be inherently true to her identity, her (deepest?) real self'. Not only does this avoid the theological wisdom that holds the self to be mired in self-deception, argues Fulkerson, 'but such a view *is* the Cartesian subject' that feminism challenges as non-relational. *Changing the Subject* (see n.10) 27-28. See also Torrance, "The Self-Relation, Narcissism and the Gospel of Grace," 491n37.

(4) to name this God as the Christian God or any other 'symbol' of her choice that promotes her 'full humanity'. Is this a view of the experiencing 'self' constituted by its relations or of the self who is still deemed to have a level of autonomy for fear that too much interdependence is a loss of 'freedom'? Actually, it is both, and more.

Linda Woodhead points out that more complex views of the 'self' than simply 'modern' or 'Cartesian' exist in much contemporary 'theology' or philosophy today, views that require further nuancing.³¹⁷ Using Woodhead's analysis, it seems that Johnson's thought actually reflects three distinct forms of the 'self' (embedded in different cultural 'strands').³¹⁸ First is the 'bestowed self', embedded in the *authoritative strand* of culture, oriented toward an authoritative source of morality and truth. Looking beyond the self to understand and perfect the self, the bestowed self considers human identity to be construed in terms of one's network of relations which function as its authoritative site. Second, the *liberal humanistic strand* embeds the 'rational self' whose identity is construed in terms of possessing a rational nature and free agency. This bounded self-differentiated self thinks, knows and discerns the proper 'laws' that order all things and can locate itself within that wider order. While the rational self is sovereign within its own individual sphere, it considers this privilege to accrue equally and universally to all human beings. Third, located in the *expressive strand* – which grounds

³¹⁷ "Theology and the Fragmentation of the Self," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1:1 (March 1999): 63-72. Woodhead's analysis is actually a refutation of the general assumption that the modern-postmodern self is 'fragmented' and destabilised, which she argues is based on a unilinear view of history (as moving through identifiable stages or 'catch-all periodizations' - premodern, modern and postmodern), and the unsubstantiated but generally uncontested belief that there was a 'premodern age' peopled by stable 'selves' and identities. Her goal is to preserve the insights of the fragmentation thesis without its generalisations regarding modernity and current crises in identity. Alternatively, she recasts the fragmentation theory based on multiple theories and modes of selfhood by generalising four 'strands' of modern culture categorised mainly by Tipton, Bellah, Taylor and then identifies the particular form of 'selfhood' embedded in that cultural possibility. "Theology and the Fragmentation of the Self," 51, 57-59.

³¹⁸ We are focusing on Johnson's three most prominent 'types' (out of Woodhead's four).

truth in subjective reality – is the ‘boundless self’. Unlike the bounded, rational self, it refuses to see itself as self-differentiated from God, other humans or the natural order.

Despite their surface differences, Woodhead observes that the *boundless* self is *in essence* the *bestowed self*. Nevertheless, the *boundless* self stands neither in relation to nor in isolation from God but rather (along with the rest of the natural world) is totally immersed in the divine as a part of her own essence. It is this individual but ontologically interrelated, boundless self that seems to be the human being Johnson envisions in panentheistic, divine-human and cosmic interrelation: ‘All creatures from the personal self to the nonsentient cosmos are mutually related and exist in an interplay of communion thanks to her presence. At the same time each individual is gifted with its own integrity, the Spirit being at once the source of individuation and community, of autonomy and relation’.³¹⁹

In addition, the *boundless self* is also *in essence* the *rational self*. While continuing to manifest the modern ‘turn to the subject’ and thus usurping those privileges formerly reserved for God, the boundless self simply takes further – or takes over – the rational self’s exaltation of human goodness, freedom and self-determination. In short, the boundless self completes the process the rational self begins: ‘Now the self is seen as omnipotent and as intrinsically good, the source of all value and the creator of all meaning. For the boundless self, morality becomes a matter of self-expression, and the self-referential notions of authenticity become the key virtues’.³²⁰

In its more religious renderings this strand of selfhood speaks of the self as having two modes: the everyday, phenomenal, limited self (the self with a small ‘s’), and the true, unfathomable Self, which is one with all (the self with a big ‘S’). For the boundless and sacralized self, the goal of

³¹⁹ *SWI*, 134.

³²⁰ “Theology and the Fragmentation of the Self,” 63.

human life is to break through the illusion, which is the 'self' to the divine reality which is the 'Self'.³²¹

Johnson describes us as being at our most human in these breakthrough moments, toward which we are dynamically oriented. Speaking metaphorically, she explains how we experience the Self of God in our self-experience: 'The Pantheon, an ancient shrine now a Christian church in Rome, offers an architectural analogy. We are not capped off, so to speak, but like that structure have a hole in the roof that admits a ray of sun and rain and toward which our spirits, in the shadows, ascend'.³²² This transcendental metaphor, however, is central to her description of *women's interpreted experience of mutual relationality* in the *imago Dei* as specific to *women's way of being*! This transcendental experience is *gendered* or *sexually* derived, and as such points to the larger truth of divine relationality. Women's way of relating – 'marked by equivalence between persons, a concomitant valuing of each other, a common regard marked by trust, respect, affection in contrast to competition, domination or assertions of superiority' – shows this to be true of God: 'God's activity is discerned in divine, free, mutual relation rather than in divine distance, rule, and the search for submission'.³²³ Thus, it appears that women's relationality is given to them in their ontology, and they have transcendental access to this reality. What then of essential humanity, or transcendental anthropology, or all humans as 'selves-in-relation'? The inner contradictions seem blatant and insurmountable.

³²¹ "Theology and the Fragmentation of the Self," 63. This notion of the boundless self lends itself most easily to a spiritual rendering, the most striking of which, argues Woodhead with Paul Heelas, is the New Age movement which explicitly celebrates self-divinization. See Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

³²² *SWI*, 65.

³²³ *SWI*, 68-9.

B. The Feminist Dilemma of Difference

Dominating Appeals

Johnson mentions above that one of the complexities she faces in developing God-talk based on women's experience is that women's experience and perspective is neither shared nor 'immediately to hand'. Thus Johnson spends vast amounts of her book explaining what women's relational experience *is* and how it expresses the relationality at the heart of all things. Again, Johnson's efforts are *feminist* – to show that it is 'women's way of being in the world' that sheds light on this truth – and thus the right way to talk about God is a 'female' way, despite her assurances that God is not gendered. Understandably, the question – for feminists and non-feminists like – is 'what constitutes 'women's' experience?' and what exactly is that an appeal to?

This question highlights another hidden irony, which is now an overt concern, in feminism's historical appeals to experience. This stems from the fact that, whatever nuances the term has taken on over time, its original – and continued appeals – were and are both hermeneutical and rhetorical. Both of these forms, in their own way, gain their strength *by appealing for a dominant position* that is inconsistent with the other.³²⁴ For instance, when Johnson appeals to women's 'interpreted' experience of conversion, it is an attempt at a *rhetorical* appeal. This is used to invoke a supposed common ground in which to place and reconcile differing opinions among feminists. And yet, 'experience' in this kind of appeal does not *refer* to *anything* nor does it add anything to the content that follows. Instead it derives from the need to give *emphasis* to what *follows*, i.e., it justifies

³²⁴ For Schnier's identification of the four general rules that govern the philosophical notion of experience, regardless of differing epistemologies or psychologies, see "The Appeal to Experience," 46-51.

her ability to describe her relational ontology as a feminist theology beneficial to women, men and creation.³²⁵

By emphasising an ideology or 'form of life' (e.g., 'women's way of being'), however, rhetorical appeals implicitly call into question the authenticity or credibility of other conversation partners and *their* opinions – *including other women*. Rather than simply naming the 'authentic articulation' of how an individual functions as a human being, it appeals to that 'experience' as the *warrant* for its acceptance as an authoritative norm or model for *a form of life* over a particular community (in this case, 'all humanity').³²⁶ This appeal, states Schnier, is essentially a claim for the dominance of one opinion over another, for the right of the opinion to be heard and possibly determinative of thought, speech, or action,

not on the basis of content or the logic used to construct the argument, but because of the genesis and possession of the opinion by a particular person or group ... It carries a sophisticated, even if intuitive, awareness that opinions in their differing are the articulation of *differing principles*, and that more is at stake than simple self-assertion. However, the appeal to experience can inaugurate a foreclosure on the necessary dialectic of opinions rather than initiate it. When the appeal is actually a demand for "my experience" to be dominant, to overcome and displace the other opinions of the conversation, then the appeal to experience degenerates to an appeal to authority in the pejorative sense, resulting in an antinomy of opinions at best, and an unmoving opposition at worst.³²⁷

Not only is true distinction suppressed in this dominating appeal, its rhetorical nature results in what Schnier calls 'a rarefied abstraction' which 'would be asymptotically approaching emptiness in its efforts to be as common as possible'.³²⁸ As a mere construct, such 'experience' is never really 'at hand' but requires mediation of some sort. Hence for Johnson to appeal to 'women's experience' as a 'given' is to actually

³²⁵ *SWI*, 8.

³²⁶ What is further masked in the rhetorical appeal is the fact that, as with any appeal to authority, one is simultaneously appealing to a tradition, its origins and connections. It displaces the authority of the Christian tradition and rejects its legitimate *difference*. Schnier, "The Appeal to Experience," 46.

³²⁷ "The Appeal to Experience," 44, 45.

³²⁸ "The Appeal to Experience," 49.

disregard its constructed nature in favour of a (constructed) 'universal' reference to its unthematic, essential character derived ontologically as an aspect of 'being'.³²⁹ Hence her methodology becomes as oppressive in her hands as she finds it to be in those of her patriarchal adversaries. It is precisely this problem that makes her postmodern colleagues nervous.

Internal Conflicts

Johnson's reformist approach is not just discordant with post-structuralist and process feminist approaches, or non-viable to post-Christian feminists. The more fundamental threat to her or any other feminist position is the postmodern and pluralist commitment to 'multiplicity' which supposedly rejects any absolute or universal claims (including its own!). According to this kind of sensibility, the kinds of claims that Johnson and feminist theology make in general – i.e., claims grounded in a moral and political ideology – cannot even be made, at least with any universal or persuasive appeal.

Whereas for almost half a century 'women's experience' was used precisely to identify women's *difference* in contrast to men, now the category itself is challenged or deconstructed *by women* on the grounds that as a general category experience *fails to uphold difference*.³³⁰ In 1990 Pamela Dickey Young published the first full-fledged

³²⁹ 'At the very point at which I am able actually to appeal to experience, I have achieved a level of awareness in which I implicitly know that I am appealing to something which I have constructed, which is therefore revisable, and subject to a request for justification of some kind' (Schner, "The Appeal to Experience," 47). This underlies Martin's criticism of Johnson and Rahner's appeal to 'unthematic' experience of God. The more the experience of 'self' becomes capable of articulation, the more it becomes differentiated from an experience of God who cannot be both the correlate of one's thematic self-experience and be 'wholly Other'. See *TFQ*, 181.

³³⁰ For a broad sense of the debate about women's experience, see Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace* (see n. 34) 117-33; Ann O'Hara Graff, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience: Assessment and Implications for Theological Construction," *Horizons* 20 (Fall 1993): 215-33; Pamela Dickey Young,

examination of Christian feminist methodology. In it she made a passing but prophetic statement: In the process of breaking free from sexism's universalising systems, women's 'experience' becomes that of refusing to take at face value *anyone's* definition of 'woman'.³³¹ Inevitably the same hermeneutic that challenged male normativity as definitive of women's identity has come to challenge the normative definitions of *other women*, thus levelling a blow at the foundation of 'women's' experience. Just *whose* experience are we referring to, and *what constitutes* that experience?

This is the 'dilemma of difference' faced by Johnson and her colleagues, presenting a 'revelatory' quandary for Catholic reformism well articulated by Catherine Hilbert in *Freeing Theology*:

Does experience refer to an individual interior awareness or feeling ...? Is revelation mediated through human experience, or are the two identical? Is revelation located in the 'transcendental depths' of the human person and mediated through her historical and social existence? If the experience of suffering and oppression of women (and others) is the starting point for a liberationist approach to feminist theology, can we speak more fruitfully of revelation as located in 'contrast experience'? Is revelation located only or primarily or in any privileged way in women's experience? Further, what experience is considered revelatory: women's historical experience of marginalization; women's experience as rooted in the body, imagination, and sexuality; women's friendships; women's mystical experience; women's bonding in circles of celebration, support, and activity for justice ...?³³²

Under the larger rubric of 'feminism' the questions are becoming even more fundamental: What defines 'woman', 'oppression', 'liberation', 'experience' and *who* within the discipline holds the *controls* over these terms?³³³ As these notions are being

Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Davaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience"; Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*; Chopp, "Theorizing Feminist Theology".

³³¹ Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 55.

³³² "Experience and Tradition," in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24) 77. Hilbert makes no attempt to answer any of these questions despite their profound influence on the method of Catholic reformism set forth in *Freeing Theology*. She simply asks in conclusion, 'can the center hold at the intersection between Christian tradition and women's experience?'

³³³ For a critique of the narrow definitions of oppression as 'patriarchal', see Linda Moody, *Women Encounter God*; and Chopp, "Feminist and Womanist Theologies." Asian feminist theologians alternatively place a unique *value* on suffering as identification with Jesus and argue that oppression is *not* necessarily a source of struggle or liberation. Black womanist theologians challenge both the common denominator of

deconstructed, so too 'the whole edifice of feminist commitments and strategies'.³³⁴ Even 'feminism' as a universal label is often repudiated and replaced by terms or categorisations like 'womanist' or 'mujerista' that reflect a particular community's 'reality' more accurately.³³⁵ In these debates, women's difference assumes a higher priority over feminist 'unity' grounded in some common experience.

All of this leads to the question of whether there really is such a thing as 'feminist' theology or are there only particular feminist theologies which can speak meaningfully only within their homogeneous groups?³³⁶ If it is the latter, does feminist theology have a future?³³⁷ Once that point of experience is deconstructed because it is considered to be based on universal, abstract norms and foundations that are now declared illusions and dominating practices by other feminists, is feminist dialogue still possible? Chopp asks, 'How will evaluative criteria and norms be established? How can

male oppression and the promotion of white, female experience, claiming an altogether different *black* experience of oppression at the hands of both men and *white* women. Latin American and African women from non-dominant cultures and certain non-white North American women reflect upon their experience of oppression under the corrosive influences of poverty and racism as well as sexism. See Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990); Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). Identifying oppression as 'heterosexism', lesbians argue that 'gender' difference is hegemonic in that it privileges heterosexuality. See Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 99-115.

³³⁴ "Introduction," *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 4.

³³⁵ Sheila Davaney reflects on the seriousness of the situation: 'What many thought was once an at least loosely unified feminist political movement and intellectual perspective has now emerged as multiple, contending, and not easily reconciled views and commitments. It is this fragmentation of feminism that has provided the central impulse for ... the critical evaluation of our frameworks and assumptions'. "Introduction," *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 4. Even Johnson acknowledges that the 'naming any particular characteristic or way of being in the world "female" are matters of intense study and debate', though she continues to base her entire theology on them. *SWI*, 61.

³³⁶ See Woodhead, "Feminist Theology – Out of the Ghetto?" in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* 198-206, 199; Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 37; Anne Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology: Method," in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24) 14.

³³⁷ In their essay, "From Isolation to Integration?" in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* 12, Diane Collier and Deborah Sawyer ask in this time of 'apparent crisis': '[A]s we reach the new millennium, the question needs to be asked, has this project of analysis and reconstruction based upon feminist principles run its natural course?'

the emancipation of women and others be both argued and guided?"³³⁸ What is it women seek to recover in rethinking and reconfiguring feminist assumptions and method, she asks, when gender is merely a construct and 'women shatter into an endless plurality?'³³⁹ When the concept of *woman* or *women* has been lost to an understanding of the fragmented self, who, and what, are we talking about and what makes our assumptions 'feminist'?

To keep from fading under 'the specter of relativism' while avoiding foundationalism, a case is now being made for qualified, limited use of experience as an 'analytical category' (Briggs),³⁴⁰ a 'regulative idea' (Chopp),³⁴¹ or an 'interpreted experience' (Johnson) to mediate feminist 'theological dialogue'. Dialogue becomes 'context-specific', taking into account then one's historical, socio-economic, geopolitical, cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts and interpretations. Though Johnson does not address how this can constitute *meaning-full theological* dialogue when there is no agreed referent under discussion (only each woman's own 'god' in/from their own experience) she does, however, see another danger – one that cuts at the heart of her feminist ethic. By emphasising 'difference' this way, one can unintentionally 'over-contextualise' and end up cutting 'the nerve of common struggle' that she believes currently unites women. If all generalisations are disallowed, she argues, then the ethical imperative 'Resist domination!' will be disabled, especially in the very cross-cultural situations where it is most necessary.³⁴²

³³⁸ Chopp, "Theorizing Feminist Theology."

³³⁹ Davaney discussing Briggs, in "Introduction," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 13.

³⁴⁰ "A History of Our Own," 165-178.

³⁴¹ See n. 339.

³⁴² *Friends of God*, 39, Johnson cites Lisa Cahill who states that despite the immediate practical importance of recovering difference for these women who have been too quickly assimilated to a 'white, middle class paradigm of women's experience', that "the eradication of all unity worldwide among women or, for that

In short, women need general categories to structure their frame of reference and their corresponding relational ethics. Because feminist ethics already relativises the authority of Church tradition, if feminism's ethical 'worldview' is relativised by the special interests of postmodernism, then the moral foundations of Catholic reformism begin to crumble. Without the common experience of oppression, there is no Catholic feminist reformism. Thus Johnson is forced to appeal to some kind of 'universal experience'. Ironically, on 'ethical grounds' she is forced to maintain a dominating methodology in an effort to build 'solidarity' while trying not to subsume the very difference she craves for women as they self-determine and distinguish themselves from other (male) dominating universals. From her methodological starting point, she has no choice, though she knows what is at risk: 'It has seemed to me that without a measure of essential commonality to ground women's human dignity, the call for justice for all women stands on shaky ground... One of theology's current tasks is to work out the bases of respect for persons in such a ways that difference is honoured while solidarity comes firmly into view'.³⁴³

This problematic appeal is essential to Johnson and her feminist reformist colleagues. Without it they can neither maintain their *feminist* agenda (women's emancipation) nor their *reformist* agenda (the reconstruction of Christian theology as text, symbol and meaning). As we saw in chapter one, their *sociocritical hermeneutic* attempts to penetrate beneath the surface-function of texts to expose their role as socially systemic

matter, among men and women, would have monstrous moral consequences.'" See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28-29.

³⁴³ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 95-96.

instruments of power, domination or manipulation.³⁴⁴ To do so, however, requires an appeal to the same norm by which textual 'deficiencies' are judged and neutralised – the elusive spectre of 'women's experience'.

Hence, feminism ideologically claims to be able to judge all of reality but has no 'experiential' reality by which it can be assessed in turn. Moreover, both the problem of sexism *and* women's discovery of their own worth and voices are elements *of* this system. Women cannot step outside of it to appeal to a higher norm. Nor is there any realistic recourse to any norm outside the system that can be brought to bear in judging the feminist interpretation that results from using their critical norm. This leads Francis Martin to ask, "where is the norm by which this new understanding can prove itself free from the same kind of power-discourse? May it not be a means by which a new elite, through the use of power, imposes itself on the rest of humanity, even in the name of liberation?"³⁴⁵

If there are as many interpretations as there are experiences, then feminist judgment over certain interpretations is theoretically as oppressive and dominating as any other judgment. On the other hand, if there are as many interpretations as there are experiences, then how might Johnson assume that these women are in fact speaking of

³⁴⁴ This involves an acceptance of Saussure's basic notions that language and culture are codes that need to be unmasked to expose their hidden ideologies that serve specific interests.

³⁴⁵ "Feminist Hermeneutics," 123. Citing Carolyn Osiek's commentary on Philippians where she argues for an interpretation that 'may be more comprehensible to the contemporary feminist reader' who might find some of the original language of Phil 2:5-11 'alien and offensive', Martin asks, 'Is comprehensibility to the "modern feminist reader" the basic category of interpretation? The perception underlying this approach seems to be that the "meaning" of the text lies in its acceptability to a particular liberationist position. This particular text may be difficult, but it is one thing to acknowledge its difficulty and another to say that the norm of interpretation is the aptitude of the text to be pressed into the service of a preestablished agenda. Such a position capitulates to the very position that is being opposed: how does such an interpretive move differ from the alleged androcentric and power-based use of language that necessitates liberation in the first place? If there is no extra-contextual norm by which a preestablished position may be critiqued we are left with the notion that interpretation is but one more move in a competing power game, and that "truth" turns out to be "success"' (125).

the God of the Christian faith – who is in fact the Self-naming Word who has made himself historically and particularly known in Jesus Christ by the Spirit to be this God and no other (Isa 45:18). Indeed, the assumption that we can give innumerable kinds of ‘content’ to the same Absolute ‘Other’ and know that we are speaking about the same ‘god’ – and that this ‘god’ is the same god as the Triune God of the Christian faith who gives his own *particular identity* – cannot help but raise a question of reference and of warrant for judging the adequacy of any given experience.

Thus, it would seem that her guiding principles are both self-contradictory and lead to precisely the opposite conclusions that she wishes to come to.

III. Summary: Critical Concerns at Johnson’s ‘Critical Juncture’

In the previous section we critiqued Johnson’s foundational appeals to experience as the basis for the panentheistic, ‘Trinitarian’ theology or relational ontology that she espouses – which will be set forth in detail in the following chapter. This final section serves to summarise the critical concerns that have been raised so far, particularly given Johnson’s contention that her theological proposition would be ‘recognizable within the contours of Christian faith’.³⁴⁶ As Johnson seeks to integrate the feminist ontological principle of divine-cosmic relationality with her interpretation of Rahner’s transcendental principle of self-experience as God-experience, she must deal adequately with questions of divine-human distinction and freedom. Out of these questions she must further address the issue of what constitutes theological language for the Christian community *with whom* she identifies and *to whom* she offers her Trinitarian ‘analogue’.

³⁴⁶ *SWI*, 8.

Johnson argues that while her feminist agenda is reformist, her theological identity remains Catholic. At the 'intersection' of these two worldviews, however, she is compelled to 'reform' the basic doctrines of the Christian tradition to correspond with her feminist values and God-talk. This two-fold agenda is inseparable, and enters the fray of contemporary methodologies which have already 'rendered' traditional Trinitarian theology problematic, if not obsolete:

Feminist theology's critique of traditional God language enters the history of theology at a critical juncture. Under the impact of modernity and postmodernity for the last two centuries, Christian speech about God has suffered a series of shocks that have rendered it more and more problematic. In response, theology has been generating new language by a creative combination of hermeneutical retrieval of ancient texts and appropriate contemporary experience. Women's search for less inadequate ways of speaking about God today intersects with other theological efforts to rethink the inherited doctrine of God, which itself has been in a crisis of reformation for some time.³⁴⁷

In Johnson's assessment, the last two centuries have served to shatter the graven image of 'God-He' that has accompanied the false God of classical theism. Given the present pluralistic spiritual climate – and women's ontological/epistemological access to 'truth' – she opens the feminist possibility of a 'less inadequate way of speaking about God' by asking what she calls 'the critical question' – i.e., 'what is the *right way* to speak about God?' She does so, however, based on the competing principles of universal transcendentalism and gendered experience.³⁴⁸ Perhaps this accounts for the irony at the heart of such a question: It is a *value-laden, universally applicable, interested* question and as such ought to offend postmodern sensibilities.

Johnson's theology, however, is layered with these kinds of conflicting presuppositions, as we have seen. Women's experience *versus* transcendental human experience, particular women's experience *versus* universal women's experience,

³⁴⁷ *SWI*, 19.

³⁴⁸ *SWI*, 3.

rhetorical appeals to experience for the sake of a dominant position (with no clear content), hermeneutical appeals that are ethic and value-laden in a postmodern climate where no absolute ethic or value can be claimed – all of these put Johnson in a precarious position as a postmodern Catholic feminist reformist.

They also put her in a precarious position in terms of tradition Christian theology. Paul Molnar, in his assessment of the implications of certain theological presuppositions held by Rahner and Johnson, reminds us that accuracy regarding God's transcendence and presence in creation has always been and continues to be imperative in Christian thought.³⁴⁹ Since Christian belief holds God to be both transcendent and involved in creation, we must distinguish between Creator and creature, both conceptually and really, so that what we are describing is a real relationship of utterly different, asymmetrical partners. Without this distinction, we are left only with our self-experiences and projections. Johnson argues that even with her methodology 'from below' she can maintain this essential distinction between Creator and creation and still honour women's unique differences as revelatory of the divine. And this is precisely what seems problematic in her enterprise.

Central to Johnson's *transcendental method* is the idea that *women* can reflect on *themselves*, posit *the absolute* and come to a *real knowledge* of the Christian God's *transcendence* and presence in *their own historical experience*. By presupposing that the 'nameless ground' that we all necessarily experience as human beings is identical with God, she posits that both human pre-apprehension and cognitive experience lead us to

³⁴⁹ "Can We Know God Directly?" 228; *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, specifically chapters one, two and four.

knowledge and experience of the Triune God, more aptly described as 'Sophia'.³⁵⁰ Underlying this is the notion of a necessary mutual conditioning between Creator and creature – God presupposes and incorporates into God's own self our *actuality* as the *condition* for the *possibility* of God's Self-communication. In reverse, God who is 'wholly other' is nevertheless the constitutive, divinizing condition of essential humanity; God's presence is necessary for transcendental humanity to realise itself.

Even with these kinds of foundational assumptions, Johnson maintains a basic agnosticism in order to reinforce the idea of God's radical distinction. (Ironically, even this level of 'unknowing' provides more adequate insight than the Christian tradition, which in turn is in need of reform!) Especially in 'revelation' Johnson considers God to be 'blessedly present but conceptually *inapprehensible*'. Johnson fails to acknowledge the logic problems with such statements, however. If God is truly inapprehensible, then we do not even have the *capacity to perceive* 'God', thereby eradicating the possibility of God-talk *in toto*. Furthermore, to argue that divine being is 'outside classes and categories' actually *denotes* a class, as does 'beyond the possibility of being imagined' or 'conceived'. Ironically, the assertion that God is outside all categories is not only a *categorical* assertion itself, but it is precisely the *necessary, categorical assertion* that grounds Johnson's claim for God's 'radical otherness'. That which she cannot ultimately understand or 'know' in a Kantian sense she categorises as 'divine mystery' or 'God'.

³⁵⁰ Again, the pattern here is the concept from the pre-conception, the 'name' of divinity from the experience of the 'nameless' and creation as the grammar of trinitarian self-revelation. Thus, says Rahner, 'According to Church teaching, the *world* in which we live is in fact *supernatural*, that is, a world which is ordered to the personal, Trinitarian God beyond the world'. This can only be true if we confuse or identify divine revelation with human reason. In the end, declares Molnar, Rahner argues for an infinitely 'qualitative' rather than *essential* difference between God and human beings, ultimately leaving us unable to distinguish God from ourselves both theoretically and practically. "Can We Know God Directly?" 230n13.

‘If God is essentially incomprehensible, above all names and thought, beyond every ideal and value, a living God!’ – how’, asks Johnson, ‘is it possible to say anything at all about the divine?’ Is she in fact asking *how* we can name what we cannot conceive or even apprehend? If, instead she means incomprehensibility and rather than inapprehensibility here, then the question is rhetorical. According to her tradition, ontological participation, negation and analogy ought to make it possible.

All of this leads to critical questions of distinction. If God in his revelation is subject to the *a priori* entitative restructuring of the human being through grace (or by the assimilation of ‘Spirit’ to created spirit) and the structures of human knowledge, is God truly *free* to reveal in whatever way God chooses? Does Johnson fail to distinguish between divine and human being and freedom simply by subsuming theology within the wider rubric of an all-encompassing philosophical principle of being, thus requiring God’s Being-Act to necessarily correspond to and be limited by something greater than or more foundational than God (Barth’s *tertium quid*)?³⁵¹ Is God’s personal being and Triune difference-in-unity truly separate from and other than the personal, existential experience of each human being, and if so, how so? Is there any possibility here of ‘knowing’ God as Other? Or is Johnson simply pressing for a kind of repristination of Schleiermacher’s *Gefühl*? Finally, is Jesus Christ truly *God* incarnate in Johnson’s theology and as such the necessary Revealer and Reconciler of humanity to God and God

³⁵¹ Molnar argues that by making experience the norm and insisting that metaphysics directs us to our inherently unthematic experience of God, Johnson and Rahner ‘refuse to make the choice between philosophical reflection, i.e., being in general, and theological reflection, i.e., the triune God in whom we believe and who transcends such reflection. Thus, despite [their] attempts to maintain God’s freedom *in se* and in revelation, instead it obviates it, as well as any real distinction between philosophy and theology’. “Can We Know God Directly?” 228-9.

to humanity. Or is he merely the ultimate expression of grace in transcendental humanity – *as well as* a feminist symbol of solidarity with the oppressed?³⁵²

In describing the God-world relation, Johnson makes some very traditional sounding statements interspersed with some very non-traditional ones: That God is beyond any category of being; that God does not need the world such that creation is an ultimately *free* divine act in 'asymmetrical relation'. On the other hand, God and the world are in real relation; God's transcendence and immanence are 'correlative' such that divine transcendence is a 'wholeness' that includes 'divine immanence' given to the world as its own 'inmost dynamism and goal'.³⁵³ The absolute difference of the world is encircled by God who is not the world, and yet as God and the world mutually co-inhere, even if God does not 'need' the world in a 'hypothetical sense', the world nevertheless 'makes a difference to God' such that God would not be God without it. God is ultimately free, unattainable mystery who can be neither known nor named with any adequacy (and so remains distinct), yet human beings and creation in general are the grammar of divine utterance and as such are relational in a manner that corresponds both with Triune relationality and women's way of being in the world.

Because theology is subsumed under the *a prioris* of the philosophical system and the *tertium quid* of relational being God is not free from but is restricted by the conditions of the system. In other words, for all of Johnson's emphasis on God's freedom, her discussion is not *a posteriori* reflection on God's self-revelation but rather on women's way of being that tells her that God must be this way – relational in the way that women are and more. God is not free to establish his own conditions or to set the terms within

³⁵² We will address this last question more fully in the final chapter.

³⁵³ *SWI*, 231.

human history regarding his Self-revelation, or to speak a word that contradicts Johnson's word, because in the system, she speaks first. Authority ultimately lies with her and any other human subject as the *knower* rather than with God who chooses to be known as a Subject prior to the human knower's experience of God. In the end, the pattern is clear – *finitum capax infiniti* and *infinitum capax finiti*. Johnson rejects Christian theism in favour of a feminist panentheism understood in terms of a transcendental and relational ontology. God and the world exist to some degree in a mutually co-inherent and deterministic relationship.³⁵⁴ (We will look at Johnson's panentheistic ontology in detail in the next chapter.)

Historically, however, Christianity has held an absolute distinction between what, or more importantly *who*, God is and is not, specifically in theistic terms. Without this distinction, there is no real possibility of the Incarnation expressing a true identification of the man Jesus Christ with YHWH. Only this gives meaning to the Chalcedonian distinction and mystery of the *two* natures of Jesus Christ (that the Creator *is* also this creature). Nor is there any need to express a distinction between the Trinity *ad intra* and *ad extra*, or of having a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in which God does the creating and creatures are what results other than God.³⁵⁵ To paraphrase Claus Westermann's description of Israel's understanding of creation, God is outside or wholly other than creation. To be created means to be not-god; it means to be an 'object' *outside* and not

³⁵⁴ While she notes the positive contributions of process theology at this point, though she sets herself apart from process thought because it fails to maintain a radical God-world distinction. 'I have long been fascinated by the aspect of process thought that posits God as the "chief exemplification" of intersubjectivity, incomprehensible precisely in being so infinitely capable of self-realization. It is a brilliant move to understand God's deity to lie not in separation and difference from the world, but in the most intense relationality of all. This insight, as well as process metaphors of God as the lure, and the fellow sufferer who understands, have surely fertilized my own thinking'. "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 102.

³⁵⁵ Robert Jenson, "Creator and Creature," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol 4:2 (July 2002): 216-221, 219.

emanating from the divine. In this way, there is no mutual interdependence. There is no *eternitas mundi* as a necessary element or correspondent to God's own being. Rather, God's being and action as Creator are wholly free even as they are exclusively *for* the world.³⁵⁶ Moreover, to view God as the divinizing condition of a human person is precisely the kind of mutual conditioning or emanationism formerly rejected by the Church fathers in the doctrine of God's Triune *aseity* and economic relation to the world, and is further rejected in Chalcedonian Christology and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.³⁵⁷

The problem with transcendental revelation being the ultimate criteria is that God cannot be different than what the human perceives God to be in her experience. She is the final authority of the definition and description of the 'Other', and defines the other *from herself*. And yet, is this not the totalising narrative of modern sexism that feminism

³⁵⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 26, found in Martin, 182-3.

³⁵⁷ Rahner ties the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to creaturely 'dependence' on the free, independent ground of being for (according to Christian doctrine) 'its ongoing being given to itself by a *personal God who establishes it freely*. This establishing then, does not have some material already at hand as its presupposition, and in this sense it is "out of nothing." Basically creation "out of nothing" means to say: creation totally from God, but in such a way that the world is radically dependent on God in this creation. Nevertheless, God does not become dependent on the world, but remains free vis-à-vis the world and grounded in himself. Wherever we find a causal relationship of a categorical kind in the world, it is indeed the case that the effect is by definition dependent on its cause. But strangely enough this cause is itself also dependent on its effect, because it cannot be this cause without causing the effect. This is not the case in the relationship between God and creatures, for otherwise God would be an element *within* our categorical realm of experience, and not the absolutely distant term of transcendence within which an individual finite thing is known ... For this reason, then, he cannot be in need of the finite reality called "world," because otherwise he would not really be radically different from it, but would be part of a larger whole as in the understanding of pantheism'. *Foundations*, 77-78. (Not surprisingly, this discussion is immediately connected to Rahner's view on the genuine autonomy of the creature and God, which Johnson regularly reiterates as a matter of insuring women's freedom from domination.) This directly challenges Rahner's view of creation as the necessary grammar of God's self-communication, that God needs a hearer to utter himself. More specifically, it directly contradicts certain of Rahner's 'symbolic necessities' that apply equally to God and to creation. These 'necessities' include (1) the necessity for all beings to express themselves in order to realize themselves (including God, i.e., creation *and* the Incarnation are God's necessary self-expression in order to *be* God), (2) the necessity for all being to be mutually conditioned and mutually conditioning, and (3) the necessity for all being to be explicable by man's general metaphysics. The first of these necessities conditions the rest (six in all) and is at the heart of Rahner's philosophy of being and thus God's Triune being and action. "The Ontology of Symbolic Reality in General," *TI* 4: 235-45.

eschews? The only way this is not problematic is to render God 'person-less' in any relational sense. But this means that God is merely the *actus purus* of 'relational being' or *being itself* in some abstract, category-defying (hence categorised) sense and so cannot be truly relational in an 'I-Thou' sense along the lines of any personal metaphors Johnson uses in *She Who Is*, or, as we shall see, in her 'trinitarian' description. Is this really how Johnson thinks of God in her relational ontology? Perhaps her use of the dogmatic categories of Trinitarian theology and Christology to describe *She Who Is* will better clarify her position.

Chapter Three:

Relational Ontology as 'Trinitarian Theology'

'Using an entirely different conceptuality, a contemporary reading of Aquinas with Rahnerian and feminist presuppositions, I have ... suggested Trinitarian language with a profoundly relational cast',³⁵⁸ states Johnson, resulting in '[a] model of free, reciprocal relation: God in the world and the world in God while each remains radically distinct'.³⁵⁹ This chapter analyses and critiques her relational ontology with specific attention paid to her re-schematization of traditional Trinitarian theology and Christology. Since Johnson sets up her theology in contrast to a particular reading of Barth, Barth's own theology is used in part to critique Johnson's assertions.

1. The Ontological Priority of 'Relation'

A. Reconceiving Divine Relationality

In *She Who Is*, Johnson asks about the right way to speak of God from women's relational experience and values. The answer is given in part by redefining the ontological relation between God and the world in a way that prioritises mutuality and reciprocity while still maintaining their ontological distinction. In other words, Johnson wishes to reform certain aspects of Christian doctrine (the doctrine of God and God's relation to the world) while holding on to others (Creator/creature distinction). Traditionally, Christian theology has maintained God's absolute, radical freedom and asymmetrical distinction from the world. However, among the key doctrines which support this understanding are those Johnson believes need reforming.

³⁵⁸ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 101.

³⁵⁹ *SWI*, 231.

For instance, the Christian tradition maintains that God does not need the world to be God; the Trinity's relationality is complete *in se*. The *koinonia* of God the Father, Son and Spirit is wholly complete and relationally 'Self'-sufficient in love and freedom. Hence, creation is an absolutely free expression of divine love extended outward to what is not God. God's being *in se* – the eternal, Triune communion of Father, Son and Spirit in unique, distinct perichoretic relation (the 'immanent Trinity') – is distinguished from God's being *ad extra* – God's Self-revelation and redemptive action in history as the Incarnate Son sent by the Father through the eschatological Spirit (the 'economic Trinity'). While God's Triune aseity is wholly consistent with his Triune revelation in salvation history, the immanent Trinity is not reduced to, nor collapsed into God's Being and action in the world.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* maintains that the Triune God creates the world by his Word. He speaks and creation is. God does not share essentially in the world but freely sustains the world as the source of its life and being. The world neither is God nor is it in God; rather God and the world are wholly distinct in nature. The Creator's difference from and identification with creation are uniquely expressed in the *homoousion*. In the Chalcedonian confession of the two natures of Jesus Christ, the Church affirms the Biblical witness of the eternal Son of God having come into the world by the Spirit *as* the unique and fully human person, Jesus Christ. Reflecting the same unity-in-distinction used to speak of the Trinitarian persons in perichoretic relation, in the historical person of Jesus Christ these juxtaposed realities are held in tension without 'confusion or change' *and* without 'separation or division'. This is the basis of Christian worship – that Jesus Christ is Lord, *Emmanuel*.

Given Johnson's 'entirely different conceptuality', however, these patriarchal vestiges of 'classical theism' posit (1) too radical a distinction between God and the world, (2) too literal and exclusive a paradigm for understanding the Triune being of God and the God-world relation (in terms of its uniquely Christian content), and (3) too patriarchal and dominating a model of relationality to account for women's experience. In sum, they create an 'unbridgeable dualism' that keeps 'divine immanence' at a 'virtually unreachable' distance from the world. Hence Johnson must reform these doctrines in order to use Trinitarian and Christological language in her re-conception of divine relationality.

Therefore, giving ontological priority to the concept of relation, she begins by arguing that the 'deepest core of reality is a mystery of personal connectedness that constitutes the very livingness of God'.³⁶⁰ Assuming that no reality can be construed apart from its constitutive network of relationships, and that women's way of being provides epistemic access to the 'essence' of all relational networks, Johnson brings the principle of relationality to bear on these doctrines. As she explains, she re-schematizes theology according to certain feminist and Rahnerian *a priori*s into an ontology that she believes still fits 'within the contours of the Christian faith'.³⁶¹

By employing trinitarian theology, and by consulting the experience of women, I stretch the Thomistic pattern into the shape of panentheism, while maintaining its presupposition of the otherness of God. Precisely as Spirit, pervading the world with the power of being, the breath of life, God also transcends the world, encompassing it in divine embrace. As far as I can see, divine autonomy in relation to the world is in no way compromised.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ *SWI*, 238, 226.

³⁶¹ *SWI*, 8, 226. She assumes that nothing she does or says threatens the Thomistic assumption that there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and the world.

³⁶² Johnson, Review Symposium - Author's Response, *Horizons*, 343.

In sum, Johnson describes the concept of God and the God-world relation as an apotheosis of relationality. The remainder of this section analyses how she reworks these doctrines to support her foundational principle.

Panentheism

The first theological concept under 'relational' reconstruction is that of 'no necessary relation' between God and the world. The idea of 'no real relation' is a feminist theological anathema, deriving from a distorted, dominating male perspective.

From a feminist perspective the denial of divine relation to the world codified in the highly specialized scholastic language [of 'no real relation'] reflects the disparagement of reciprocal relation characteristic of patriarchy in its social and intellectual expressions. If the ideal is the potent, all-sufficient ego in charge of events and independent of the need for others, then to be connected in mutuality with others introduces "deficiency" in the form of interdependence, vulnerability, and risk. Genuine mutuality threatens any form of domination, including the paternalistic ordering of things. Thus it is not accidental that classical theism insists on a concept of God with no real relation to the world, even when this is interpreted as an affirmation of divine transcendence. Unrelated to and unaffected by the world, such a theistic God limns the ultimate patriarchal ideal, the solitary, dominant male.³⁶³

Clearly, any good feminist theology mandatorily parts company with classical theism at this point.³⁶⁴ On the other hand, Johnson argues that pantheism is not an adequate alternative. If classical theism holds too radical a distinction, then pantheism threatens distinction – at least *women's* distinction. This model may initially hold promise in terms of mutual interrelatedness, but the dominant 'divine other' ends up engulfing women, submerging their individual identities and keeping them from free self-actualisation. Thus, it too is a 'suffocating deception'.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ *SWI*, 225.

³⁶⁴ *SWI*, 231.

³⁶⁵ *SWI*, 231.

Hence Johnson's panentheistic approach attempts to 'safeguard the radical distinction between God and the world while also promoting their mutual, if asymmetrical, relationship'.³⁶⁶

All Christian speech about God ... affirms that God dwells intimately at the heart of the world. But it is quite otherwise with the question of whether the indwelling is reciprocal ... If theism weights the scales in the direction of divine transcendence and pantheism overmuch in the direction of immanence, panentheism attempts to hold onto both in full strength ... Here is a model of free, reciprocal relation: God in the world and the world in God while each remains radically distinct ... As a working paradigm panentheism would be false only if God is dissolved into the world or the world identified with God in some monistic fashion. Otherwise it is a view that operates with a certain "logic of the infinite," as Karl Rahner observes, whereby connectedness between creatures and their Creator does not diminish the difference between them but rather enhances it in direct proportion to the strength of their union ... The boundary between God and the finite world is only creation's boundary, not God's, if God is incomprehensible mystery beyond every category.³⁶⁷

In this model, God 'is never not related to the world'.³⁶⁸ Divine immanence is equated with relational being indwelling the world such that it becomes the world's inmost dynamism and goal.³⁶⁹ Even divine transcendence is described in inclusive language that incorporates created reality; it is 'a wholeness that includes all parts, embracing the world rather than excluding it'.³⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Johnson argues that the mystery of divine transcendence and immanence is such that created existence remains distinct, autonomous and free through its participation in divine being while there remains at the heart of all things 'a constitutive presence of God'.³⁷¹

³⁶⁶ *SWI*, 231.

³⁶⁷ *SWI*, taken from 230-232 (emphasis added).

³⁶⁸ *SWI*, 236. In the 'Matrix' of God, says, Johnson, this relationship of mutual indwelling is *non-hierarchical* and reciprocal, but it is not *strictly symmetrical*, for the world is dependent on God in a way that God is not on the world'. *Women, Earth*, 42-43. Per Aquinas, however (*ST*, Ia, A8), 'God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident; but as an agent is present to that upon which it works'.

³⁶⁹ *SWI*, 231. We shall see how Johnson develops this characteristically Rahnerian view in the next chapter.

³⁷⁰ *SWI*, 231.

³⁷¹ "Does God Play Dice?" 11.

Infinitum Capax Finiti - Kenosis Reconceived

Johnson distinguishes her panentheistic position from both process theology and pantheism by assuming God's ontological otherness. Hence she posits that a critical aspect of the principle of relationality is its dual function as a 'principle of *self-distinction*'.³⁷² This distinction-within-relation keeps the ontological priority of relation without capitulating to an essential monism.³⁷³ How so? Through the process of divine *kenosis*. Just as the universe itself is *capax infiniti* and can reflect the *image* of God even as it is present *in* God,³⁷⁴ conversely, God perdures *capax finiti*, 'kenotically' making room in itself for that which is 'other'.³⁷⁵

Looking for spatial-temporal metaphors to express this relation, Johnson incorporates a Jewish idea into a Christian one. The Jewish notion of *zimzum* depicts God as self-limiting or imposing 'boundaries' on infinite being, as it were, to make room *at some point in time* for creation.³⁷⁶ In the act of creating, God contracts or 'infolds' the divine being and constricts divine presence and power, in order to 'make room' for creation without swallowing it up. She then links this notion to the concept of *kenosis*, not from its primary reference in Jesus Christ, but as a *general* category (Jesus Christ is a 'paradigmatic enactment' revealing the pattern of divine action 'always and everywhere

³⁷² *SWI*, 231-2.

³⁷³ Johnson believes she escapes any charge of emanationism or monism by assuming the qualitative difference between God and the world grounded in the presuppositions of efficient causality. "Review Symposium," 343. In his review of *SWI*, John Carmody expresses concern over Johnson's seeming to posit an *eternitas mundi* while losing sight of the necessary and *desirable* freedom of the divine aseity. "Review Symposium," *Horizons*, 337. In a remarkably sexist response, Johnson argues that only men seem to find this view of relationality a threat to divine independence. She defends her view by referring to the wisdom of *female* social psychologists like Carol Gilligan and Jean Baker Miller (344).

³⁷⁴ Johnson, "The Cosmos: An Astonishing Image of God," *Origins*, Vol. 26, no. 13 (Sept. 12, 1996): 206-12.

³⁷⁵ *SWI*, 236.

³⁷⁶ Moltmann develops this concept in *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 108-111; and *God and Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 88.

operative').³⁷⁷ In short, creation – not Jesus Christ – is the enactment of divine *kenosis*.³⁷⁸ Furthermore, there has never been a 'time' when the 'trinitarian relations' did not choose to share the divine life and thus to create. Hence, although the world is not necessary to God in a 'hypothetical' sense, it does 'make a difference to God. She would not be creator, vivifier, redeemer, liberator, companion, and future without it'.³⁷⁹ Ultimately,

God cannot be circumscribed over against the finite world, for this would be an unwarranted and indeed impossible restriction. Rather, the universe, both matter and spirit, is encompassed by the matrix of the living God in an encircling which generates uniqueness, futurity, and self-transcendence in the context of the interconnected whole.... God's generous self-emptying is the condition for the possibility of finite existence in its own autonomy, while the difference between Creator and creature is embraced by the One who is all in all.³⁸⁰

Despite the fact that God is beyond every category, Johnson's model presupposes that divine reality corresponds to the category of mutual interrelatedness. This does not just apply to God, however. Mutual relation requires *reciprocal* indwelling. Thus, while God 'dwells' intimately at the heart of the world, the world is likewise present in God: It is a 'sacrament'.³⁸¹

The intrinsic interrelatedness of God and the world ultimately leads Johnson to ask, 'If the relational God and the world coinhere in mutual if asymmetrical reciprocity, is it appropriate to speak about God *in the singular*...?'³⁸² She answers with a conditional 'yes', only, however, until '*a new word emerges* for the as yet unnamable understanding of holy mystery *that includes* the reality of women as well as all creation'.³⁸³ This word

³⁷⁷ *SWI*, 234.

³⁷⁸ *SWI*, 234. Johnson defends her thought by drawing from Simone Weil, Moltmann and William Hill.

³⁷⁹ *SWI*, 232.

³⁸⁰ *SWI*, 234.

³⁸¹ *SWI*, 230-31; "Does God Play Dice?" 11. Moreover, the 'incarnational and sacramental imagination' behind this notion eschews any fundamental competition between God and the world, i.e., there is no subordination (*SWI*, 231). Johnson does not explain what she means by 'incarnational' and 'sacramental' in this context. However, there is no reference to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ anywhere in her discussion of the God-world relation. Whatever these terms mean, they are abstracted from that reality.

³⁸² *SWI*, 236 (emphasis added).

³⁸³ *SWI*, 42-43 (emphasis added).

does not ultimately refer to God *per se* – even as the source of relational Being - but to the larger ‘mystery’ of ‘relation’ itself – inclusive of all finite and infinite reality, spirit and matter. Here Johnson strives for language to speak of an overarching concept that describes the *matrix* of *all* ‘relational being’ – indeed, something more foundational than God alone.

B. The Relationality of ‘Being’

Assuming that a Supreme Being with personal freedom, power and authority would invariably oppress (or be used symbolically by men to oppress), radical feminist Mary Daly several decades ago condemned all theologies that ‘hypostatize transcendence’. Daly rejected any theologian who would speak of God as an objective, Self-referential and all powerful Being.³⁸⁴ Daly recommended two alternatives. First, women could speak about God as ‘ground’ and ‘power of being’ by adopting the theories of Tillich, Whitehead or James. Second, they could develop an entirely new language growing out of ‘awareness’ of ‘that reality which is both transcendent and immanent’ and which cannot be reduced to or adequately represented by such expressions as ‘*person, father, supreme being*’.³⁸⁵

Johnson incorporates aspects of both alternatives. She agrees with Daly concerning the oppressive potential in thinking about God as an objective, Self-referential Other. Also like Daly, Johnson criticises classical theism for having ‘hypostatized’ and thus collapsed God’s transcendence, reducing ‘the infinite horizon of Being’ to a member of a genus, however exalted its membership. Whereas the mystery of God is beyond *all* images and conceptualisations, she argues, ‘in practice theism has reified God, reducing

³⁸⁴ Mary Daly, “After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 53-62.

³⁸⁵ Daly, “After the Death of God,” 57-8.

infinite mystery to an independently existing Supreme Being alongside other beings, a solitary, transcendent power who together with the world can be thought to form a larger whole'.³⁸⁶ Through the application of the feminist relational principle, however, the 'Supreme ruler' is wrested from his monarchical throne and replaced with a new idea of God as mutually, inclusively interconnected with creation.³⁸⁷ As women experience and name the divine, says Johnson, we find classical theism in its demise.³⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Johnson is an essentialist when it comes to speaking of divine as well as human reality. Both realities are understood in terms of her essential category of and language for being. Unlike feminist Carter Heyward who contends that any images of God as 'wholly other' or 'being itself' deny or displace God's mutual relatedness to the world,³⁸⁹ Johnson finds the notion of being highly useful, even though it requires more precision or modification. In fact, Johnson argues that God is 'radically' and distinctly 'other' as 'being itself'! Though she admits to a 'legion' of historical difficulties with the notion, its long philosophical and theological tradition 'from Philo to the early Mary

³⁸⁶ *SWI*, 20.

³⁸⁷ This belief in cosmic interconnectedness is at the heart of ecofeminism and is generally articulated in terms of women's embodiment, motherhood, and generativity. See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); Johnson, *Women, Earth, "The Cosmos: An Astonishing Image of God,"* *Origins*, 26: 13 (September, 1996): 206-12; and *SWI*, 170-187. This is precisely what Linda Woodhead calls the metanarrative of the 'New Spirituality', generally described in terms of 'spirit' or 'being', which she observes in Johnson and other feminists. See "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 197. Also see Woodhead's article, "Post-Christian Spiritualities," in *Religion* 23 (1993), 167-181, where she traces the development of the New Spirituality since the inception of Western feminism's 'second-wave' in the 1960s. For an appreciation of the feminist regard for the created order and also a serious critique regarding created self-worship, see Loren Wilkenson, "'Post-Christian Feminism" and the Fatherhood of God," *Crux* (March 2002): 16-30.

³⁸⁸ *SWI*, 19-22; "The Search for the Living God," 3-5. Johnson is susceptible to the same charge that Daphne Hampson levels at Rosemary Ruether — that concerned only with her idea of God, she is not really a theist at all. *Theology and Feminism*, 29.

³⁸⁹ Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A theology of mutual relation* (Washington, DC: 1982). Heyward claims more than this: The God of theism is not only 'cold deity' incapable of love or friendship, 'he' is the 'keeper of the ethical scorecard', the unquenchable 'narcissist', King, Judge, 'rapist'; in short, 'He is the first and final icon of evil in history' (156).

Daly' shows it capable of describing *what we intuit from experience*.³⁹⁰ 'Being', she says, is classical philosophy's language for existence: 'Human thought seeks out what it is that energizes all things to exist and arrives at the idea of being, a notion like no other'.³⁹¹ In turn, 'being' is classical theology's shorthand for speaking of divine mystery or what she commonly refers to as the 'unknowable mystery of God' or 'incomprehensible liveliness'.³⁹² Encompassing the formal and material, the infinite and finite, it serves Johnson well as an over-arching concept:

[T]he ontological language of being has the advantage of providing an all-inclusive category for reality at large, leaving nothing out Connected to the idea of God, language about being indicates that all things that exist are related to God as the source of their existence, and hence to each other. It is thus a code word of the universe's status as creation. Predicated of God, being symbolizes sheer livingness, which is also a going forth, an unimaginable act of communion that issues in everything. It is thus a code word for God as source of the whole universe, past, present and yet to come.³⁹³

Though Johnson often describes God as 'being itself', she concedes that 'being' does not define 'divine being'. Divinity isn't captured in the category of being as its biggest and best instance. As 'pure being' God transcends any genus, concept, or category.³⁹⁴ In this sense, God is utterly unknowable and nameless. And yet, this does not keep us from knowing divine mystery in any sense. On the contrary. 'Insofar as this consistent negation invalidates nothing except the limits of the affirmations we make about being, it actually can give off a little light. For the not-knowing that comes at the end of thought pursued to its limits is actually a deeply religious form of knowing'.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁰ *SWI*, 237.

³⁹¹ *SWI*, 237.

³⁹² *SWI*, 238.

³⁹³ *SWI*, 237. Contradictorily, Johnson first argues against any nominalistic concept of an objective 'substance' or monistic category linking God and creation and then tries to describe their relation in terms of this prevailing category.

³⁹⁴ *SWI*, 240.

³⁹⁵ *SWI*, 240. 'Lest we despair of ever knowing the divine in any way at all', Johnson claims that God is ultimately known in *human love*: 'In the end, we are united to God as to an unknown, savoring God only through love' (108).

Why? Because as we know and transcend our own 'horizon' we surmise that the 'infinite horizon of being' is God – even the Triune God of the Christian faith.

'Being' is not only 'the most foundational reality' of all, but in its 'pristine theological sense' it *inherently* includes the category of *relation* – divine, human and non-human. Not only do all created things share in being, the source of which is God – making being the essential, categorical link between divinity and created reality – but God *as* Being 'signifies ultimate reality as pure aliveness *in relation*, the unoriginate welling up of fullness of life in which the whole universe participates'.³⁹⁶ Ultimately, 'God's being is not an enclosed, egocentric self-regard but is identical with an act of free communion'. Being related is at the heart of divine being – it constitutes God's very essence. As Johnson summarises, '*What* the divine nature is is constituted by *who* God is in triune relationality without remainder'.³⁹⁷

How is this known? Not through faith in God's own Self-revelation given in the Incarnation and through the Holy Spirit, not through the attestation of Scripture or the ongoing historical witness of the Church. Rather, Johnson argues again for an epistemic link between Christian theology and feminist experience. Relying upon the gender dualism she elsewhere shuns, Johnson looks to women's experience to inform the 'real relation' between God and the world. In a scathing, commentary on male experience which seems to forget the Christian Trinitarian doctrine of mutuality, reciprocity and

³⁹⁶ *SWI*, 238, 240. One is inclined to ask how she gets all of this out of the hypostatization of the existential predicate. In John Milbank's essay "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 174-191, he argues that religions do not *provide* varying *accounts* of any 'thing' or aspect of Being. They *are* different accounts of Being itself or of "what there is." As such an account, each religion has to reclassify other, incommensurable accounts when it encounters them, according to its own perspective' (189). If this is so, how can Johnson's feminist relational ontology be universally 'true' and applicable?

³⁹⁷ *SWI*, 228, 227. 'Who' does imply a Subject, however.

equality that Johnson elsewhere argues so 'vigorously' coalesces with feminist thought, she points to

*another human experience that finds self-transcendence enacted precisely through affinity rather than quarantine; another interpretation of the fullness of being that includes rather than excludes genuine, reciprocal relations with others who are different; another pattern of life that values compassionate connectedness over separation; another understanding of power that sees its optimum operation in collegial and empowering actions rather than through controlling commands from on high. Women typically witness to deep patterns of affiliation and mutuality as constitutive of their existence and indeed the very grain of existence itself. From this perspective the image of an unrelated or only superficially related God is a distortion.*³⁹⁸

In short, any transcendental perspective on God but this one is the wrong one, for this experience points *essentially* to 'the way things truly are'.

'Like a Trinity'

Johnson argues that the right way to speak about God's immanent presence (mediated by women's experience) is to speak of God as a triune 'mystery of relation': 'At the heart of holy mystery is ... a threefold *koinonia*'.³⁹⁹ It is her contention that Trinitarian language and symbol 'vigorously coalesce' with the feminist principle of relationality. Classical tradition insists on the radical equality of triune 'persons in relation'. Their difference, however, is constituted by their *ways of being related*.⁴⁰⁰ The idea of *perichoresis* underscores this affirmation of mutual coinherence and reciprocity.

³⁹⁸ *SWI*, 225. Emphasis added. What exactly is this a distortion of? *Transcendent reality*, to which men and women have equal access and interpretation? Or, is this a distortion of the God of Christian faith, in which case Barth would concur? As Janet Soskice observes: 'The god whom feminist theology loves to [hate] is the lonely, spectral father-god, aloof, above, and indifferent. God of scripture is a God who creates freely from abundant love and who is present to this creation. Christian beliefs about Jesus develop this story of love, concern and intimacy, and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity concerns the way that God is 'with us'. Rather it brings out the Christian conviction that God, the eternal creator is fully present to our human history – even to the point of taking human flesh and dying on a cross – and fully present to us now in the Spirit'. "The Trinity and Feminism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 135–150, 139.

³⁹⁹ *SWI*, 199, 191.

⁴⁰⁰ *SWI*, 195.

In this ontology of relation, 'love' moves in reciprocal patterns of giving and receiving.⁴⁰¹

Hence Johnson states:

The ontological priority of relation in the idea of the triune God has a powerful affinity with women's ownership of relationality as a way of being in the world...the very essence of God is to be in relation, and thus relatedness rather than the solitary ego is the heart of all reality.⁴⁰²

It is 'from below' that God's 'triune' relationality is made apparent. The relationality manifest in the world as *capax infiniti* – specifically at the apex of women's relationality – reveals what divinity looks like. Ultimately, however, the indirect, symbolic character of 'triune mystery' can only be thought of symbolically. Hence Johnson describes the trinity as 'one core religious symbol' in need of theological reconstruction.⁴⁰³ The question is how to portray divine relationality accurately. The feminist answer is in women's experience and symbols.

Johnson's agnosticism prevails when it comes to actually 'naming' the Nameless as the Triune God of the Christian faith. She argues that 'the questions on the Trinity placed later in the *Summa* proceed under the sign of not-knowing already laid down by the earlier questions as true for all human knowing of divine mystery, whether that knowledge arises from traces of God in creation or from the revealed word ... Even in

⁴⁰¹ *SWI*, 196.

⁴⁰² *SWI*, 216. Ironically, when Johnson declines process theologian Joseph Bracken's offer to 'come over' to his theological camp based on the number of similarities between their theologies, she fails to account for her own 'totalizing philosophical system': 'When a system is in such tight control, it itself seems to take the place of God, domesticating, encompassing, governing divine truth....From my perspective shaped by the notion of God as relational Being itself, *esse ipsum subsistens*, this is not adequate to the being God of God, nor to divine transcendence itself – *which of course is always* immanently related to the world that participates in divine being; nor does this necessarily lead to dualism. The imperial pressure of a totalizing philosophical system indeed domesticates infinity, but I would argue that wildness is much more desirable'. "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 102-3 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰³ *SWI*, 12. In what seems an utter disregard for enormous differences in theological meaning and content, Johnson generalises the works of Barth, Jüngel, Rahner, Moltmann, Boff, Kaufman, McFague, Tillich, Pittenger, Gilkey, Hodgson, Panikkar, Lash and Letty Russell (*SWI*, 205-211), describing them as recent Trinitarian 'trends' all of which *reshape* the Trinity by using theological terms to describe metaphysical concepts, 'trying to make sense of this central but somehow esoteric symbol' (209, emphasis added).

faith we remain united to God as to an unknown'.⁴⁰⁴ Thus, trinitarian speech is always indirect, having a metaphorical, analogical, or symbolic character, for the 'triune God is not simply unknown, but positively known to be unknown and unknowable – which is a dear and profound kind of knowledge'.⁴⁰⁵ In short, we cannot know and confess truthfully that God is the One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which, in Barth's words, is the grammar of the Christian faith.

It is ironic, therefore, that on the one hand, Johnson states in *She Who Is* that she is explicating 'a theology of the triune God that sets out from the experience of the Spirit',⁴⁰⁶ while on the other, she makes clear that she does not espouse a doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Thus, her 'symbol' does not describe 'God' *in se* but speaks only of God's relationality *indirectly* through the world's relation to God.⁴⁰⁷

The symbol of the Trinity is not a blueprint of the inner workings of the godhead, not an offering of esoteric information about God. In no sense is it a literal description of God's being *in se*. As the outcome of theological reflection on the Christian experience of relationship to God, it is a symbol that indirectly points to God's relationality, at first with reference to the world and then with reference to God's own mystery. The Trinity is itself an analogy referring to divine livingness. ... God is *like* a Trinity, *like* a threefoldness of relation.⁴⁰⁸

The 'trinity', then, is not a description of God or even of God's Triune being and action in the world. It is a particularly 'Christian' description of the *human experience of relationship to divine mystery*. Three experiences in Christian tradition – God (as ground or Creator), Jesus (as God's 'envoy' of solidarity) and the all-pervading Spirit – allow

⁴⁰⁴ *SWI*, 110.

⁴⁰⁵ *SWI*, 205.

⁴⁰⁶ *SWI*, 122.

⁴⁰⁷ In *SWI*, Johnson entitles her doctrine of God section "Speaking About God From the World's History". As she explains, 'I am very wary of any talk about the immanent Trinity without initial and continuing reference to the experience of salvation through Jesus in the Spirit I also think one can never develop an adequate model of the immanent Trinity...'. "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 102-3. Catherine LaCugna says something similar in *God For Us*: '[T]he economy itself does not *necessarily* imply real distinctions "in" God that are of a different ontological order than the distinctions in the economy. There *may be* such distinctions, and it *may be* a legitimate enterprise for a purely speculative theology to posit such intradivine distinctions, but there is no transeconomic perspective from which to posit their existence' (226-7). This must pose a challenge for doing theology as *doxology*.

⁴⁰⁸ *SWI*, 204-5. Original emphasis.

three kinds of 'relations' to be spoken of, each *between God and the world*.⁴⁰⁹ Johnson assumes there to be a kind of divine-world correspondence 'economically revealed' in human experiences of 'salvation'. She bases this on Rahner's axiom, 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice-versa'.⁴¹⁰

The 'coalescence' she finds between feminist thought and Trinitarian theology leads her to argue that God is 'like a Trinity', i.e., like the feminist principle of relationality, symbolised as 'Sophia-God':

Three experiences come to human beings from one God. Therefore three sorts of relationships are possible with one God. Therefore three corresponding distinctions may be said to exist within one God... The threefold, interwoven aspects of encounter with the one holy mystery point to Sophia-God who is not a monolithic block but a living mystery of relation, to us and to herself.⁴¹¹

Again, Johnson's 'trinitarian description' derives from human encounter with the 'living mystery of *relation*' ('who' is in relation?) both '*to us and to herself*'. When this 'divine livingness' – that is 'like a threefoldness of relation' – is symbolised in trinitarian, perichoretic terms *from the world*, it

evokes a livingness in God, a dynamic coming and going with the world that points to an inner divine circling around in unimaginable relation. God's relatedness to the world in creating, redeeming, and renewing activity suggests to the Christian mind that God's own being is somehow similarly differentiated.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Johnson describes 'salvation' experience as an experience of human love equated symbolically with the 'triune persons': 'There is a sense in which we have to be touched first by a love that is not hostile (the "third" person), before we are moved to inquire after a definitive historical manifestation of this love (the "second" person), or point from there toward the primordial source of all (the "first" person)'. *SWI*, 122-3.

⁴¹⁰ Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 21-24, 82-103, and passim. Johnson, *SWI*, 199-201. *SWI*, 209-211. This is also the heart of LaCugna's argument in *God For Us*. The Trinity, its internal processions and their *ad extra* reality in Jesus and the Spirit do not come between our natural knowledge and the absolute mystery of God. In grace, says Rahner, 'God does not apply a saving 'something' to man, but gives his very *self* as our salvation in a most radical manner, so that God-in-himself and the God-of-our-salvation are strictly identical'. Hence 'nameless' Absolute Being *is the same as the immanent Triune God*, who – based on an assumed essential correspondence in God's being and action – is the same as the 'economic' Trinity experienced historically. "Observations on the Doctrine of God in Catholic Dogmatics," *TI* 9:130; "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *TI* 4:69. Molnar critiques this method for assuming 'that theology can be done seriously by substituting our experiences of what we call God, i.e., the Unoriginate Origin, for the reality of the triune God who transcends both the experience and the idea of such an *arche*. The triune God in fact remained hidden for the tradition and was accessible only through faith' ("Can We Know God Directly?" 249-50).

⁴¹¹ *SWI*, 198-9, 201.

⁴¹² *SWI*, 216.

Moreover, relational being has a specific character – one of radical mutuality and equality that acknowledges no before/after, no superior/inferior, no domination/subordination. This egalitarian element is foundational to the relationality which *is* God and thus foundational to the divine-human relation. This means that there is no competition between God and the world. Rather, as Johnson frequently reiterates, ‘friendship with God’ and human autonomy grow in direct and not inverse proportion. If God is creator, redeemer and lover of the world, then God’s own honor is at stake in human happiness. Where humans are diminished, God’s glory is diminished. In the occurrence of ‘full humanity’, claims Johnson, Irenaeus’ axiom is never truer – *Gloria Dei vivens homo*. God’s glory increases in direct proportion to human flourishing.⁴¹³ And what promotes human flourishing? Whatever symbol effectively communicates this relationality by effectively connecting to experience.

Johnson explains that Rahner’s axiom points to ‘the epistemological truth that it is given to us to point to the latter [the immanent Trinity] only through the former [the economic Trinity]’.⁴¹⁴ The ‘former’ economic Trinity is not the Father, Son and Holy Spirit known analogously in human experience through the historical events of God’s revelation. The ‘economic trinity’ is the three-fold experience of divine relationality. Johnson abstracts the Trinity from its unique, concrete revelation of God *within* salvation history – the very form and content of God’s Self-utterance as Father, Son and Holy

⁴¹³ *SWI*, 14.

⁴¹⁴ *SWI*, 199.

Spirit⁴¹⁵ – and states that the Trinity is ‘a legitimate but *secondary concept*’ that synthesizes in a “short formula” the concrete experience of *salvation*.

It is specifically the human *experience of salvation* (‘the Christian experience of faith’) that is ‘the generating matrix for language about God as triune’.⁴¹⁶ On the other hand, Johnson also states that ‘God is God as Spirit-Sophia’ who ‘enters into holy souls and not so holy ones, to make them friends of God and prophets...’; ‘God is God again as Jesus Christ, Sophia’s child and prophet...’; ‘God is God again as unimaginable abyss of livingness, Holy Wisdom, unknown and unknowable’.⁴¹⁷ Is this *God* or are these secondary concepts describing ‘God’ as the source of salvation experience?

Apparently it is the latter, for her trinitarian analogue does not ‘name’ the Triune persons. Again, she does not take such a view of divine personhood and is not convinced that we can speak of the Triune God as such. Rather, because we cannot know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his inner essence, the ‘secondary concept’ of the trinity can go by many names. In her own ‘naming’ process, Johnson draws from two dominant twentieth-century Trinitarian ‘models’; the ‘single subject pattern’ of Barth and Rahner and the ‘social trinity’ model of Moltmann and Boff.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ Soskice also argues that the doctrine of the Trinity arose from the practical and pastoral concerns of the early church in its experience of Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit. Soskice, however, makes the assumption with the early church that this was *God* present among them. States Soskice, in a manner reminiscent of Barth: ‘It was reasonable for Christians as well as their critics to ask – “If there is only one God to whom we can pray, then who is this Jesus and how can we pray to him?” The Christian scriptures already posed the problem. In identifying Jesus with the Lord who “Let light shine out of darkness” (2 Corinthians 4:5-6), Paul applied divine titles to Jesus which the devout Jew of his day would have appropriately applied only to the God who created heaven on earth. ... In confessing belief in “One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” the believer confesses the Trinity, or better, confesses a *Trinitarian faith*. The doctrine is best seen not as an additional conviction [“and by the way, I also believe in the Trinity”] ... It is a *grammar* of Christian faith whose function was to safeguard what the early church took to be the central Christian witness’. “Trinity and Feminism,” 136.

⁴¹⁶ *SWI*, 198. This particular experience is described as women’s coming into a sense of human value and dignity from one of worthlessness (being from non-being).

⁴¹⁷ *SWI*, 213-14.

⁴¹⁸ *SWI*, 205.

Though she favours Moltmann's social trinitarian approach (though rejecting his concept of atonement), Boff offers 'a more adequate pattern for *ultimate reality*', a model 'wherein there is total equality amid mutuality and respect for difference'.⁴¹⁹ Here, 'the triune symbol ... is a model for the highest ideal for humanity. It lays the foundation for a liberated society of equal brothers and sisters, critiques patterns of unjust domination, and offers a source of inspiration for change'.⁴²⁰ Therefore, the model she develops must reflect her 'highest good', i.e., the salvation experience that best images the ontological priority of relation. Starting here, however, means she must begin with transcendental experience of the 'Spirit'.

Being as 'Spirit'

Like Daly and most other feminists, Johnson rejects patriarchal and ruling terms for God.⁴²¹ Unlike Daly, however, she adopts traditional metaphors like 'Spirit' and 'Sophia', as well as personal metaphors such as 'mother' and 'friend' given new meaning from feminist colleague Sally McFague.⁴²² With this raft of metaphors Johnson attempts to speak of divine being in both ontological and relational terms.

Her primary theological term for relational being or 'hypostasized transcendence' is 'Spirit'. Logistically, she interchanges 'being' with 'Spirit' to speak of the being of God in and among the world, claiming that these terms refer synonymously.⁴²³ 'The one relational God, precisely in being utterly transcendent, not limited by any finite category, is capable of the most radical immanence, being intimately related to everything that

⁴¹⁹ *SWI*, 208 (emphasis added).

⁴²⁰ *SWI*, 208.

⁴²¹ At least temporarily, in the first instance, until some 'gender identity equilibrium' is established, despite Johnson's affirmation that there is no gender in God. *SWI*, 56-57.

⁴²² *SWI*, 131, 144-46, 233-36.

⁴²³ 'Whatever is said about the Spirit is in fact language about the mystery of God'. *SWI*, 121.

exists'.⁴²⁴ Hence, 'the deity of God does not consist in being over against and superior to, but expresses itself in freely drawing near and being connected in mutual relation' which is precisely 'the way the Creator Spirit is present and active in the world'.⁴²⁵

In a sense, Johnson's relational ontology, even when described in 'trinitarian' terms, constitutes a type of pneumatology.⁴²⁶ She commandeers the Hegelian concept of Spirit and equates this concept with relational Being, also called 'Spirit-Sophia', 'the Spirit of God', 'Spirit' and 'Creator Spirit'. The 'Spirit of God' is even the 'triune Spirit', not necessarily to be identified, however, with the Spirit of the Father and the Son. She then focuses on the Spirit's immanent relationality: '[T]here is no possible aspect of the Spirit of God, either *ad intra* or *ad extra*, that can be spoken about without factoring in the idea of relation in an essential way. Can there be an unrelated Spirit, existing in splendid isolation? The history of theology shows that the notion has been and is unthinkable'.⁴²⁷ This leads her to the following immanentist conclusion:

Since what people call God is not one being among other beings, not even a discrete Supreme Being, but mystery which transcends and enfolds all that is, like the horizon and yet circling all horizons, this human encounter with the presence and absence of the living God occurs through the mediation of history itself in its whole vast range of happenings. To this movement of the living God that can be traced in and through experience of the world, Christian speech traditionally gives the name Spirit. ... This nomenclature seems particularly effective in signifying divine elusiveness and the fact that no human concept can ever circumscribe it ... [T]he term's elusive and dynamic qualities enable it to express human experience of God who transcends all

⁴²⁴ SWI, 229.

⁴²⁵ Johnson, *Women, Earth*, 27, 32, 40. Is this freedom not conditioned in an ontology of mutual coinherence? Noting their multiple similarities process theologian Joseph Bracken finally asks Johnson, 'Who or What is meant by the term "Creator Spirit"? Is "Creator Spirit" the Holy Spirit or God as Spirit in a generic sense? Or perhaps "Creator Spirit" is all three divine persons acting in coordination to effect the creation, redemption and sanctification of their creatures?' "The Theology of God of Elizabeth A. Johnson," in *Things New and Old* (see n. 2) 23.

⁴²⁶ Gary Badcock concurs. See "Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 144-49. Amy Plantinga Pauw also speaks of seeing Rahner's 'universal pneumatology' (one which precedes Christology) at work in Johnson's thought. "Braiding a New Footbridge: Christian Wisdom, Classic and Feminist," *The Christian Century* (November, 1993): 1161.

⁴²⁷ SWI, 148. *Women, Earth*, 44, 58.

things while yet remaining in communion with all of reality in a dialectic of presence and absence that knows no bounds.⁴²⁸

It is from this assumption that Johnson argues for a trinitarian description that starts from experience of 'the' Spirit. It does not require a threefold image or 'triune prism' (e.g., sun/beam/light; root/stem/flower, etc.) to understand the Spirit as the presence of divine being in the world.⁴²⁹ Nor is the Spirit manifest only in keeping with the divine character. 'If we ask more precisely which moments or events mediate God's Spirit, the answer can only be potentially *all* experience, the whole world ...in and through the world's history: negative, positive, and ambiguous; orderly and chaotic; solitary and communal, successful and disastrous; personal and political; dark and luminous; ordinary and extraordinary; cosmic, social, and individual'.⁴³⁰

At this point, other relational models, both for God, and for the God-world relation, help to give more concrete, embodied expressions of the Spirit's mutual, non-competitive coinherence with the world.

C. Relational Symbols

Triune Sophia

In Johnson's estimation, starting with experience seems to compel an adequate theology – and a Trinitarian description – to start with the Spirit. Starting with the Spirit also enables Johnson to start with human experience and to tie it directly to her symbol of choice – *Sophia*. In rejecting classical Trinitarian language and with it a doctrine of

⁴²⁸ *SWI*, 124.

⁴²⁹ *SWI*, 123, 127.

⁴³⁰ *SWI*, 124 (original emphasis). One wonders how the brutal experience of Stalinism and Nazism, or the Jewish, Armenian, and Cambodian holocausts, or, as Paul states, 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like', which he describes as *contrary to the Spirit*, can be considered experiences of the Holy, transforming, life-giving, loving, patient, kind, good, peaceful, faithful, gentle, joyful Spirit of God (Cf. Gal 5:16-25).

distinctly divine Self-revelation, Johnson relies on her feminist reinterpretation of the Judaic Wisdom tradition that allegedly brings the Spirit and *Sophia* 'practically to the point of identity'.⁴³¹ In fact, she argues that Wisdom was *the central* Judeo-Christian symbol of the faith, not Yahweh or eventually Jesus Christ as the Logos.⁴³²

Wisdom 'does' all the things Yahweh does – She 'creates, redeems, sanctifies, establishes justice, and protects the poor'.⁴³³ Most importantly, Wisdom disconnects God's revelation from the 'once-for-all sacred deeds of history' in the Old Testament and from the particularity of Jesus Christ and the concept of atonement. As a 'universal concept', Wisdom, says Johnson, 'does not find its center in the temple [the place of Yahweh, of Jesus Christ and of the Spirit, ultimately as the Church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21-22)] but is given to anyone who searches out the order of creation in order to live in harmony with it'.⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ *SWI*, 94, 146, 211-12; *Women, Earth*, 52; *Friends of God*, 42-43; "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 120-122. Ironically, Johnson admits that here too she has had to critically revise the originally 'intensely androcentric' Wisdom tradition for it 'to yield an inclusive vision of wholeness that can benefit women as well as men, indeed the whole earth'. "Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist, 1993), 96. While Johnson argues (*SWI*, 94) that 'allusive' OT and inter-testamental texts bring God's Spirit and Sophia 'practically to the point of identity', this description of the 'horizon' of mystery is actually a reiteration of Rahner's *Vorgriff*. For an exegetical argument against the equating of *Sophia* with *Yahweh*, see Gordon Fee, "Wisdom Christology in Paul: A Dissenting View," *The Way of Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 251-279.

⁴³² Wisdom, she contends, was eventually sidelined by post-Enlightenment scholars in favour of historical and prophetic books that emphasised a dominating form of 'Yahwism'. These scholars falsely 'alleged' that the centre of Jewish religious experience was an encounter with the Holy God through God's mighty historical acts. *Friends of God*, 42. Karen Jobes directly refutes Johnson at this point, stating that 'Jewish apologists presented the wisdom teaching of Solomon in the Hellenistic marketplace of ideas to recommend that true wisdom was to be found in the knowledge of Yahweh, the One, True, Living God who had created all', and 'to exhort the Jewish people themselves to remain faithful to Yahweh while living in a society that was presenting seductively attractive alternative religions'. It was not to bring Yahweh under the larger universal of Sophia. Jobes also specifically critiques Johnson's Wisdom Christology, in "Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?" in *The Way of Wisdom*, 232, 243.

⁴³³ *SWI*, 133. "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 121.

⁴³⁴ 'Its religious focus is not on personal sin and its overcoming or other intra-religious matters, but on walking the way of righteousness in human responsibility for culture, with the goal of a rightly ordered life amid the good things of this world'. *Friends of God*, 42-43. However, the temple and the cross as sacrificial loci signify that God reconciles and re-orders the divine-human relation through Jesus Christ. Christians profess 'Christ crucified' as Lord and God. Otherwise, Johnson's position would be virtually

In short, this notion of God jointly grounded in Being-Spirit-Wisdom is simultaneously dislodged from its moorings in the specific Biblical revelation of Yahweh ('I AM THAT I AM') and Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Son (the 'I AM' who is One with Yahweh and their Spirit). As the pattern unfolds, we see a 'notion of God' expressed pneumatologically and ontologically 'in three-fold repetition'. According to Johnson's 'trinitarian template':

Spirit-Sophia who blows where she will, pervading the world with vitalizing and liberating power, brings divine presence in the world its widest universality. *Jesus-Sophia*, preaching the nearness of the reign of God, embodying in his own relationships with the poor and outcast the compassionate love of heaven for the earth, being crucified for it, and raised to glory in the Spirit as pledge of the future of all, brings divine presence in the world to the point of its most precise particularity. Holy Wisdom, the unoriginate *Mother* of all things, upholding the world as the generating and continuously sustaining source of the being and potential for new being of all creatures, radicalizes divine presence in dark mystery.⁴³⁵

Thus, as Johnson starts with a general ontology and anthropology and moves toward a description of its source, she also moves in her Trinitarian description from a generalised, quasi-Hegelian understanding of 'Spirit' to its source.⁴³⁶ In language that reflects the unity-in-distinction of Trinitarian doctrine, Johnson explains that the 'unknowable mother of all' issues forth her word of Wisdom 'as an eternal divine movement of self-distinction, which when posited externally, grounds creation, becomes

indistinguishable from that of Carter Heyward, who states: 'A trinitarian faith rooted and grounded in the love of God would never require that people be Christian in order to be saved ... And how do we live a trinitarian faith? In our struggles for mutual relation, we are breaking free from the self-absorbing and authoritarian religion that distorts the image of what is most fully human and fully divine among us'. *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What it Means to be a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 172.

⁴³⁵ *SWI*, 229 (emphasis added).

⁴³⁶ Ironically, this means that although she claims that the Spirit is her starting point (from experience), she needs the primordial reality of the unoriginate Ground of Being – Mother-Sophia – to ground the meaning or 'character' of the Spirit, as it were. In this sense, she follows the traditional pattern of Trinitarian procession, for which she criticises Barth and Rahner. Their interpretations, she claims, are ultimately contemporary reprivations of the ancient Greek design of Trinity where a single divine origin has two distinct but essentially interrelated issues; the Father is the principle of the godhead, and goes forth through the Word in the Spirit. When the first person is made the originating source who issues in the second and third persons as modalities of his own being, a 'subtle subordinationism asserts itself', and true mutuality is questionable (*SWI*, 205-7).

personally concrete in the incarnation, and takes shape in ongoing fragmentary anticipations of the world's salvation'.⁴³⁷ Mother-Sophia, however, is specifically named for her relation to *the created order*, not as a reality-depicting metaphor based on any internal relation to an eternally pre-existent 'second person' in 'the eternal movement of self-distinction'.

According to Johnson's Christology, Wisdom becomes 'personally concrete' in Jesus-Sophia, the uniquely graced human who 'walks in the way of the Spirit' in solidarity with the suffering world. Sophia-Spirit, whose 'essence might well be called connectedness', becomes present in and 'personally grounds' her 'envoy', Jesus. This human, whom Johnson describes as a unique 'Spirit phenomenon',⁴³⁸

connects God once for all to concrete embodiment, to the world ... in a way that can never be broken. Long-standing dichotomies are herein brought into mutual coinherence: creator and creature, transcendence and immanence, spirit and body ... Through his human history the Spirit who pervades the universe becomes concretely present in a small bit of it.⁴³⁹

Here it becomes apparent that Johnson has, as she says, fully 'imbibed' Rahner's Christology (as well as the far-reaching implications of his Trinitarian axiom). She then extends it in keeping with her feminist commitments by integrating his Christology as 'realised anthropology'⁴⁴⁰ with her feminist concept of divine relationality.

⁴³⁷ Following Rahner at this point, Johnson states that when humanity seeks to know and name and 'articulate the absolute point of origin that is no point', it first speaks of unoriginate being. 'As Rahner observes, life-less identity [the distant, 'solitary' God of classical theism] is not the most perfect way of being absolute'. *SWI*, 236-240, 206. See Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4:114.

⁴³⁸ *SWI*, 150-51.

⁴³⁹ *SWI*, 151, 169.

⁴⁴⁰ Rahner speaks of Christology as 'self-transcending anthropology' and anthropology is 'deficient christology'. *Foundations*, 284. Johnson attributes her Christology as having been fundamentally shaped by Rahner and Pannenberg. See "The Ongoing Christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg," *Horizons* 9/2 (1982): 237-250, and "Mary and Contemporary Christology: Rahner and Schillebeeckx," *Église et Théologie* 15 (1984): 155-182. For a concise, alternative analysis of their Christologies, see Colin Gunton "Christology From Below," in *Yesterday and Today*, 10-32. Gary Badcock explains that whereas Rahner considers the evolutionary pinnacle of human self-transcendence to be the Christ-event (where both divine self-communication and human self-transcendence reach their definitive expression), it is the mystery of *all* human existence precisely *as human*. "Rahner, the Trinity and Religious Pluralism," *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (see n.427) 144-146.

The *homoousion* is thus re-interpreted according to Rahner's transcendental principle and considered to be the most radical form of *creaturely* self-transcendence. This means that the hypostatic union is fully realized when human knowledge of the created spirit regarding this unity with the Word transpires. 'Hence', says Rahner, 'the hypostatic union *necessarily* fulfills its own being in what we call (in neo-Chalcedonian terminology, if you like) the inner divinization of the human nature of Christ in grace and glory'.⁴⁴¹ This makes Jesus more than a 'mere' human being. He is the *ultimate* human being who comes into existence as God's definitive 'self-expression': His 'basic constitution' is to have his origins in God radically and completely. Far from diminishing the genuineness of his humanity, however, this unity with God enhances it, since in relatedness to God the creature comes ultimately to its true reality.⁴⁴²

Thus, Johnson views the 'incarnation of Sophia' as a metaphysical concept derived from transcendental principles more than as a contingent fact. In so doing, she presupposes this to be the 'climactic moment' in the essential, non-competitive unity between God and the world. Jesus' human value is also in his victim status; out of his free and unconditional love for others (particularly the poor and the oppressed), he suffered in solidarity with them through his unjust crucifixion. In this way, he is the human exemplar of God's care for and entry into the suffering of the world.

Given her feminist concerns, Johnson draws attention away from Jesus' maleness and toward his generic humanity.⁴⁴³ She notes that the Nicene creed explicitly affirms *et*

⁴⁴¹ Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," 68 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴² "Mary and Contemporary Christology," 165.

⁴⁴³ "The Maleness of Christ," 111. '[T]he historical Jesus, who was indisputably a male human being, is interpreted as the incarnation of the Logos, an ontological symbol connected with rationality and thus, according to Greek philosophy, with maleness. The Word made flesh is then related to human beings defined according to an androcentric anthropology that sees men as normative and women as derivative'. "Redeeming the Name of Christ: Christology," in *Freeing Theology* (see n. 24) 118. What Johnson never

homo factus est – ‘and became human’ or assumed human nature – not *et vir factus est*, stressing male sexuality.⁴⁴⁴ (The irony in Johnson’s *anti-sexist* approach is that she more or less ignores Jesus’ gender, or worse, generalizes it under a general description of humanity that disregards particularity, precisely in order to stress women’s ‘particularity’ – and *then* subsumes women’s particularity under general descriptions of experience!) She argues that if stress is placed on the latter (*vir*, or man), then the early Christian axiom – ‘What is not assumed is not redeemed, but what is assumed is saved by union with God’ – leaves the female half the human race unredeemably outside of God’s salvation.⁴⁴⁵

The question is what relevance this axiom has for Johnson in terms of salvation or redemption through Jesus? The relevance lies in his being the paradigm of *redeemed* humanity. ‘On the assumption that there is but one history of the human race in which all human beings have solidarity, the destiny of one member of the human race can have universal significance for all the rest’.⁴⁴⁶ In Jesus Christ is actualized ‘the victorious fulfillment of human nature’.⁴⁴⁷ ‘We experience the ‘risen Jesus’ as the ‘redeemed man’ – he was really redeemed insofar as his humanity has made the passage through death to the fullness of life by the power of the Spirit. The death and ‘resurrection’ of this real human actualises his free fidelity toward God and God’s abiding fidelity toward him and in him the whole human race.’⁴⁴⁸

addresses is how her own *female* ontological symbol connected with a feminist view of relationality that sees women as normative and men as derivative is any different, barring the gendering substitutions.

⁴⁴⁴ Wells, “Trinitarian Feminism,” 336.

⁴⁴⁵ Johnson, “Redeeming the Name,” 119. The axiom attributes to Gregory of Nazianzus.

⁴⁴⁶ “Mary and Contemporary Christology,” 166.

⁴⁴⁷ “Mary and Contemporary Christology,” 167.

⁴⁴⁸ “Mary and Contemporary Christology,” 163.

When it comes to speaking of Jesus' resurrected reality, however, she relies on the 'humility of the apophatic approach'.⁴⁴⁹ The resurrection is an 'unimaginable event enveloped in the mystery of God', about which she is agnostic, and thus language about his resurrected humanity (in 1 Cor 15:35-45) 'proceeds', like all other divine mystery, 'under the negating sign of analogy'.⁴⁵⁰ What she does know is that while his life is hidden in God, '*his presence is known only through the Spirit ... the inevitable limitations of Jesus' humanity are completed in the wholeness of the human race anointed with the Spirit*'.⁴⁵¹

In other words, though Jesus was a unique 'Spirit phenomenon', we are like him to the degree that we too are 'spirit in the world' and thus 'other Christs'.⁴⁵² The Spirit of Sophia – also called the Spirit of 'Christ' – was unique *in* this man but not unique *to* this man or *from* him. Hence the Spirit of 'Christ' is greater than and not limited to Jesus-Sophia or to those 'who know his story'.⁴⁵³ Fundamentally, 'the nature of Christian

⁴⁴⁹ *SWI*, 163.

⁴⁵⁰ *SWI*, 163.

⁴⁵¹ *SWI*, 163-4 (emphasis added). "Mary and Contemporary Christology," 163.

⁴⁵² Johnson incorporates aspects of Spirit and Wisdom Christologies into her Rahnerian Christology. Their thrust is to minimise the pre-existence of the Son and his ongoing, new humanity (and priestly office) through the Incarnation, resurrection and exaltation. The Spirit *of* the risen Christ is equated with and collapsed *into* the risen Son, Jesus Christ. Alternatively, Gordon Fee argues that whereas the Spirit can be said to be 'christocentric' in Pauline theology, 'such an understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit is a far cry from the "Spirit Christology" spoken of so confidently by many' (e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975)). Fee adds: 'that the risen Christ and the Spirit are clearly distinct from each other in Paul's thinking is demonstrated from all kinds of evidence', the most significant being the combination of Rom 8:26-27 and 8:34. 'On the surface one could argue for "identification" in function; but what one gets rather is the clearest expression not only of "distinction" but of the fact that the risen Christ is not now understood by Paul to be identified with the Spirit'. *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers: 1994), 837-38.

⁴⁵³ Wherever the Holy Spirit is sundered from the person of Jesus Christ, argues Barth, thus dissolving the New Testament recognition of their unity, 'sooner or later He is always transmuted into quite a different spirit, the spirit of the religious man, and finally the human spirit in general'. 'If, then, we want truly and properly to understand the Holy Spirit and His work upon us, we can never try to understand them abstractly and in themselves. ... [W]e must never look at the subjective reality in which he might presumably or actually be seen experienced. We must look rather at the place from which He comes and at what He brings. ... We must look to the objective possibility of our communion with Christ. In other words, we must look at Christ Himself'. *C.D.* I.2, 251, 249.

identity as life in Christ, the one anointed in the Spirit, cannot be restricted to the historical person Jesus nor to certain select members of the community but signifies all those who by drinking of the Spirit participate in the community of disciples. "Christ" is a pneumatological reality, a creation of the Spirit who is not limited to whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female'.⁴⁵⁴ Moreover, the boundaries of the community of the saints are far from rigid and certainly include persons of persuasions *other than Christian and even of no religious belief who live according to the light of their conscience*'.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, we do not participate ontologically in the life of Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Rather, we remember Jesus by example, and everyone who acts like him, whether they know it or not, are 'in Christ', because we are 'in' Spirit-Sophia – the essence of divine relationality.⁴⁵⁶

Sophia and the World

a. Maternity-Generativity

With the symbol of Sophia in place, and in the typically feminist move away from God as 'Lord of' or 'wholly other', Johnson adopts the image of mother for God's relation to the world: 'Holy Wisdom is the mother of the universe, the unoriginate, living source of all that exists. This unimaginable livingness generates the life of all creatures,

⁴⁵⁴ *SWI*, 162.

⁴⁵⁵ *Friends of God*, 96.

⁴⁵⁶ Douglas Farrow notes that Johnson follows Strauss's lead and basically loses her own hard-fought 'humanity' to a general theory of immanence: 'Ancients and moderns are allied in misconstruing alienation between God and humanity in terms of epistemological or ontological distance. Consequently they are allied also in constructing systems of mediation which, even where christological, operate by denying Christ's particularity. For the only way to overcome alienation, thus understood, is to eradicate distance and otherness: to unite, to homogenize, to divinize; in effect, to universalize the incarnation. And there is no way to do that without turning away from the human Jesus, or indeed from what makes us human. ... No doubt this calamity is what the serpent had in view from the beginning, when it first invited humans to introduce alienation by coveting equality with God. At all events, it is the predictable outcome of the kind of thinking which wars against divine transcendence by inventing a general theory of immanence, a theory which plays itself out politically and culturally as an attempt to slake the unquenchable thirst for universal unity'. *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 255-56n2.

being herself, in the beginning and continuously, the power of being within all being'.⁴⁵⁷

Hence the ultimate metaphor for divine-cosmic interrelatedness is maternal generativity or pregnancy/birth.

This reality is the paradigm without equal for the panentheistic notion of the coinherence of God and the world. To see the world dwelling in God is to play variations on the theme of women's bodiliness and experience of pregnancy, labor and giving birth. ... they wonderfully evoke the mystery of creative, generative love that encircles the struggling world, making possible its life and growth in the face of the power of nonbeing and evil. As some of our poets now say, "in her we live and move and have our being" (gloss on Acts 17:28).⁴⁵⁸

This leads Johnson back to a radical view of interrelation and one that points to the essential relationality of being – 'the mother image points to an intrinsic relatedness between God and the world as a loving relationality that belongs to the very essence of being a mother and never ends'. In other words, God's relation to the world belongs to her very essence.⁴⁵⁹

b. Friendship – *Perichoresis*

The other key model that Johnson uses is 'friendship', tied particularly to the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis* – friends encircling one another in the dance of relational inclusiveness.⁴⁶⁰ 'Holy Wisdom, the horizon encircling all horizons, is a profound mystery of relatedness, whose essential livingness consists in the mutuality of friendship. The love of friendship is the very essence of God'.⁴⁶¹ Why is this the best analogy to characterise the mutuality of the divine-world relation? Because friendship is

⁴⁵⁷ SWI, 179. *Women, Earth, 57-8.*

⁴⁵⁸ SWI, 234-35.

⁴⁵⁹ Molnar states that whenever the world belongs to God's essence, then God's creative function has absorbed his essence in 'typically Cartesian fashion. Pantheism always implies that God cannot exist without the world. Johnson's position clearly bears that out'. "The Purpose of the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity," in *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (see n. 195), 25.

⁴⁶⁰ Friendship is consistently upheld as an ideal model of community in feminist theology. See, for example, Johnson, SWI, 144-5 and passim; *Friends of God and Prophets*, chapter 12 and passim; McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 157-67; *Metaphorical Theology*, 177-92; Sharon Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox: 1999), chapters 1 and 5.

⁴⁶¹ SWI, 218.

'the least possessive, the most mutual of relationships, able to cross social barriers in genuine reciprocal regard ... characterised by mutual trust'.⁴⁶² As the 'friend of the world' God freely shares being, freely 'gives' to, in and of the world, we freely express that being and interrelatedness to God, one another and the cosmos. The importance of this metaphor is that it implies that friendship is reciprocal and mutual, from God's side and ours. It is 'the most free relation known to adult human beings'.⁴⁶³

In other words, friends enter into relationship voluntarily, equally and mutually, both to give and to receive.⁴⁶⁴ Technically, there is no hierarchy in friendship and thus no possibility for domination of the 'other'.⁴⁶⁵ If we are ontologically bound to God, then to characterise God as friend 'equalises' the relational partners. God may be asymmetrically 'other' in absolute mystery, but 'Lordship' is eliminated while human autonomy and freedom are preserved.⁴⁶⁶

When turning to trinitarian description, Johnson notes that classical theology's 'hesitancy' to use the friendship metaphor for the triune relations is because such a characterisation sets up '*so much mutuality* that the persons become indistinct'.⁴⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Johnson states that God's 'inner befriending is constitutive of "personal" distinctiveness' – 'in love' unity and differentiation are correlates rather than opposites.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶² SWI, 217.

⁴⁶³ SWI, 145. Johnson follows McFague here.

⁴⁶⁴ SWI, 217. Johnson seems to echo feminist theorist Marilyn Friedman's description of friendship, where its appeal as a feminist communal concept is based on 'voluntary choice'. In other words, friendship allows the subject to be in control of the choice of an 'other' with whom they relate. "Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community," in *Feminist and Political Theory*, ed. Cass Sunstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 143-158.

⁴⁶⁵ Ironically, the *voluntary* aspect of mutual friendship always seems to be emphasised in conjunction with statements about relationality as an *essential* human condition. How can one *volunteer* to be what one is *essentially*?

⁴⁶⁶ This conceptual outworking attempts to defend against what Francis Martin earlier described as the Enlightenment and feminist correlation of causality with domination.

⁴⁶⁷ SWI, 145.

⁴⁶⁸ SWI, 217.

II. *Dogmatic Implications*

A. *Trinitarian Critique*

Johnson has argued that her alternative, feminist Trinitarian doctrine of God, shaped fundamentally by Rahner's theology and metaphysics and further modified according to her feminist principle of relationality, remains faithful to the basic elements of the Christian faith. On the one hand, she states that her starting point is the 'interpreted experience of the Spirit' that allows her to 'think through to the *living triune God*'.⁴⁶⁹ On the other hand, she validates this starting point based on its coherence with 'the *human experience of salvation*, without which there would be no speech about the *triune God* at all'.⁴⁷⁰

Again, on the one hand, 'the triune God is not simply unknown, but positively known to be unknown and unknowable' and on the other, 'In knowing the God who is our origin, ground and goal, we do not know a shadow image of God but the real living God of Jesus Christ in their Spirit. The God who saves – this *is* God'.⁴⁷¹ Tossed between the 'simply unknowable' yet 'saving', 'living God', ultimately she argues that all we can do is indirectly surmise a 'threefoldness' about God's being from our 'salvation experience'. In the end, the Trinity 'is in no sense a literal description of God's being *in se*' but 'a symbol that indirectly points to God's relationality, at first with reference to the world and then with reference to God's own [utterly unknowable] mystery'.⁴⁷²

One encounters, therefore, a continual ambiguity in Johnson's thought. She makes references to the 'living' Triune God – the original content of which only comes from

⁴⁶⁹ *SWI*, 122.

⁴⁷⁰ *SWI* 122.

⁴⁷¹ *SWI*, 201; she is here citing LaCugna, "Reconceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation," *SJT* 38 (1985): 1-23, 13.

⁴⁷² *SWI*, 204-5.

Scripture and tradition, and ultimately from God's Self-revelation as such. This assumes epistemic access through faith in and relationship with (indeed, ontological relation to) the living Triune God. She then disclaims any possibility of knowing God as such, and that what knowledge is available comes through 'women's experience'. This assumes that the concept 'trinity' is an abstract idea or symbol given wholly apart from God. It is instead a human concept externally applied to the idea of God. This ambiguity makes for a rather amorphous Trinitarian 'doctrine'.

In the context of advancing an appeal to human experience and articulating her suspicion of any dichotomization between God and the world, Johnson argues for 'critically acceptable criteria to argue the credibility and universality of the question of God'.⁴⁷³ In the process, she launches a two-fold attack on Karl Barth's doctrine of the Trinity and corresponding God-talk.

First, she critiques what she perceives to be 'the radical dissociation it presupposed between God and human experience'. Second, citing Pannenberg, she criticises Barth for his 'retreat from engagement with contemporary criteria for the truth

⁴⁷³ "The Legitimacy of the God Question," 290. Johnson cites Pannenberg's critique of Barth's approach in "Types of Atheism and Their Theological Significance", in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol II, George H. Kehm, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 184-200. Echoing von Harnack, Johnson considers Barth's method to be, 'the ultimate example of pure subjectivism, open to the charge of illusion'. See, e.g., Adolf von Harnack, *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox, 1968), 165-66, 174. George Hunsinger argues that Harnack's perplexity with Barth was due in part to Barth's failure at the time to distinguish between normative and valid claims. From *C.D.* IV.3 and other later statements in *Church Dogmatics*, Hunsinger believes that 'what Barth wanted to say was something like this: All theological statements derived and grounded independently of God's revelation must be subjected to a process of *Aufhebung*. In and of themselves such statements can never be normative, and therefore theology can never build upon them or enter into synthesis with them, not even critically'. What truths are imbedded in such statements in abstraction from revelation can only be liberated 'by a process which subjects the abstraction to a kind of death and resurrection, or complete cancellation and then reconstitution on a higher or different plane. ... In short, theological statements independent of revelation can never be normative and never be valid in themselves. But they contain elements of truth which, once liberated, can function as likenesses (but no more) to the truth of God's revelation'. "The Harnack/Barth Correspondence: A Paraphrase with Comments," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 333-35.

of assertions into a “supranaturalistic wildlife sanctuary.” This served to restrict Christian speech to the “self-inflicting isolation of a higher glossolalia,” and made it impossible to mount any public argument for the universal truth of Christian statements’. Third, she repudiates Barth’s grounding of faith ‘on pure decision in response to an announced authority without any appeal to reason or objectivity’.⁴⁷⁴

Given that Barth is universally recognised as the primary influence of Rahner’s doctrine of the Trinity⁴⁷⁵ – on which she seeks to draw – and given secondly that Barth’s exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity *includes* an extended analysis of Christian experience expressly located within the context of his doctrine of God, it would seem to be worthwhile considering where precisely their ways part and thus how valid these criticisms are. Furthermore, it is arguable that Johnson’s use of Rahner’s Trinitarian axiom – which can be traced to Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity – creates much of the ambiguity in her own thought.

A Basic Articulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

‘The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation’.⁴⁷⁶ In short, there is no way to separate the formal content of the doctrine of the Trinity from the domain in which God has given himself to be known, experienced and worshipped as Father, Son and Spirit. As God makes himself known this way, he also

⁴⁷⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from “The Legitimacy of the God Question,” 289.

⁴⁷⁵ See, e.g., Alistair Heron’s reference in *A Century of Protestant Theology* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1980), 177; Neil Ormerod, *Introducing Contemporary Theologies* (see n.3) 109; Ralph del Colle, “the Triune God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136.

⁴⁷⁶ C.D. I.1, 301.

establishes the community of faith – those ‘born of water and the Spirit’, who are ‘given the Spirit of adoption’ and made one with the Father and the Son through the latter’s obedience (Jn 3:5; 17:11-25; Rom 3:21-26; 8:14-17; Eph 1:4-14; 4:4-7; Col 1:15-22).

These are the Scriptural and sacramental foundations (Mt 28:19), as well as the doxological content and ‘grammar’, of the Body of Christ. The Church is comprised of those who have heard and responded to the *call of God* – the God who in love, has freely created, redeemed and restored them for eternal fellowship, making possible and actual their knowledge of him in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Rooted and grounded ontologically ‘in Christ’, the Church responds in freedom, love and obedience as it is continually conformed to his image. In sum, the doctrine of the Trinity is the heart of the Christian faith *as* the life of the Christian community *in* participation with the Triune God. Creaturely talk about God thus begins with God’s free Self-determination to be who he is and is entered into by the Church, in doxology and thanksgiving, through its ontological participation in God’s Triune being.

For Barth, this doctrinal understanding is grounded from beginning to end in *who* God is and how God has revealed himself to broken humanity as such, restoring their humanity and communion with him in the process. For Barth, theology, or Christian faith and speech, are not first source but response – witness to a personal *encounter* with God. It is only possible because God has first spoken and given himself to be known. From Barth’s viewpoint, the various nineteenth-century attempts to root and validate theological language in some aspect of human experience had simply engaged in Feuerbach’s damning reduction of theological statements to theological language. But theology is not primarily concerned to express or articulate the contents of experience.

God has spoken, and that speaking alone furnishes a basis upon which the Church may in turn talk about God, and thereby grants theology its *raison d'être*. God, Barth writes, 'makes Himself present, known and significant to [men] as God. In the historic life of men He takes up a place, and a very specific place at that, and makes Himself the object of human contemplation, human experience, human thought and human speech'.⁴⁷⁷

Thus, Barth maintains that to speak of the Triune God of the Christian faith, and, secondarily, to speak of humanity's relation to God, is to speak God's own *miraculous* and mysterious Word – 'Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to man'.⁴⁷⁸ Specifically, God, who is only known *by* God, gives himself in the 'being-act' of this Word, i.e., in the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ in whom humanity and divinity meet in utter uniqueness without confusion or commingling. This is not a word *about* a concept of God or 'the divine' in abstraction. Rather, it is God's own particular Self-talk deriving from his own particular, Triune being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This particular Word tells us that while he is wholly *other than us* as Creator and Lord, God is also the one who freely chooses to be essentially *for us*, encountering humanity in his own humanity in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This

⁴⁷⁷ Hart, citing Barth, in "Barth, The Trinity and Pluralism," 31. For concise summaries of Barth's Trinitarian theology, portions of which I have incorporated here, see Hart, "Karl Barth, the Trinity, and Pluralism," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (see n.427) 124-142; and Alan Torrance, "The Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 72-91. For extended treatment on Barth by both Torrance and Hart, see *Persons in Communion* and *Regarding Karl Barth*, respectively. In addition to Hart and Torrance's interpretations of Barth, I am also indebted in particular to George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and *Disruptive Grace* (see n.474); McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); T.F. Torrance *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); and Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In dialogue with Karl Barth and contemporary theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

⁴⁷⁸ C.D., I.1, 4.

Word is absolutely unique from any other word spoken to or by humanity, since its origin is not in created reality.

As God the Subject gives himself as 'object' to be known by us, we discover that he is *for us* precisely as we discover our *need* of him. For in Jesus Christ, we are confronted both with *who* God is as Lord and as Saviour, and with *who* we are as sinners, judged and forgiven. For Barth, the paradox of the gospel of grace is manifest in the fact that this two-sided revelation can occur – it requires that it be an act of God from first to last.⁴⁷⁹ Because God is holy, as sinful creatures our darkened minds cannot apprehend or comprehend God's holy majesty. Furthermore, because God is *wholly other* than we are as creatures, God does not belong to the world of objects with which human apprehension and speech ordinarily have to do and to which they are fitted to pertain. God's reality transcends creation in such a way that our human knowing could never aspire to lay hold of it and render it into an 'object'. God is beyond human classification, understanding and description and so confronts us in absolute mystery.⁴⁸⁰ We possess no natural aptitude for knowing God, even through the *analogia entis*.⁴⁸¹ Thus, revelation is always necessary – and miraculous – wherever the distinction between God's existence and fallen human existence is taken seriously.

⁴⁷⁹ It will thus 'remain a miracle to all eternity of completed redemption'. *C.D.* 1.2, 245.

⁴⁸⁰ At this point, Barth is in full agreement with his modern Kantian heritage and so in theory, with Johnson and Rahner, though Johnson and Rahner nevertheless proceed to subsume God within the categorical principles of their metaphysics.

⁴⁸¹ *C.D.* 1.1, 168; 1.2, 257. Though Barth initially stated that the Roman Catholic *analogia entis* is 'the invention of the Antichrist' (*C.D.* 1.1, x) he later retracted that statement in light of Gottlieb Söhngen's account of the *analogia entis* (*C.D.* II.1). In fact, Barth later states that were it *not* for the *analogia entis*, 'I at the same time allow myself to regard all other possible reasons for not becoming Catholic, as short-sighted and lacking in seriousness'. It has been argued that Barth's *analogia fidei* shares similarities with the *analogia entis*. See e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. E. T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

In becoming God for us, God heals the breach so that he can draw us into the circle of his own self-knowing. This means that revelation and reconciliation are two aspects of the same reality: they are both ways of referring to what happens and what must happen in order for humans to be drawn into a personal encounter with God and thereby, to know Him.⁴⁸² Thus, 'knowledge' of God is not an objectifying 'knowledge about' God. Although it exists within a precise conceptual and verbal matrix, it is above all a *self-involving and self-transforming communion with God as personal Other*.

This gets to the heart of Johnson's critique of Barth's supposed dissociation between God and human experience. Barth would seem to anticipate the kind of criticism which Johnson and Pannenberg raise when he writes: '[T]o my regret I am continually hearing it said that I am putting revelation and faith up in the clouds so far as the believer is concerned'.⁴⁸³ Barth cites examples of Wobbermin's accusation that, for instance, Barth was 'teaching a *fides quae creditor* without regard for the *fides qua creditor*, the intimate personal experience of faith is to be completely eliminated."⁴⁸⁴ Wobbermin also asserts that for Barth, 'The transmission of revelation is not thought of in such a way "that the nature of man is also taken into account."⁴⁸⁴ Not so, says Barth. God's making himself known to a human being and that human being's encounter with God in that personal revelation of Jesus Christ as God is a *wholly experiential* reality – and it affects every level of that person's being. At issue is what *kind* of experience and *what conditions* that experience. This leads Barth directly to the individual's communal identity and participation in the Triune God *as the Church*.

⁴⁸² Hart, "Revelation," 42.

⁴⁸³ C.D. 1.1, 209.

⁴⁸⁴ C.D. 1.1, 209.

[T]he Word of God *must be* understood as *an event in and to the reality of man*.... There can be no objection in principle to describing this event as "experience" and even as "religious experience." The quarrel is not with the term nor with the true and important thing the term might finally denote, namely the real and supremely determinative entry of the Word of God into the reality of man. But the term is burdened – which is why we avoid it – with the underlying idea that man generally is capable of religious experience or that this capability has the critical significance of a norm...Naturally experience of the Word of God always takes place in an act of human self-determination. But it is not experience of the Word of God as this act. ... Nor is there any place here for the view that this experience is a kind of co-operation between divine-determining and human self-determining. ...If man lets himself be told by the Word of God that he has a Lord, that he is the creature of this Lord, that he is a lost sinner blessed by Him, that he awaits eternal redemption and is thus a stranger in this sphere of time, this specific content of the Word experienced by him will flatly prohibit him from ascribing the possibility of this experience to himself either wholly or in part or from dialectically equating the divine possibility actualized in this experience with a possibility of his own.⁴⁸⁵

Both the content of the Word and fallen humanity's inability to hear it lead Barth to conclude that experience of God is from first to last a gift of God to human beings. In the very act of acknowledging who God is and who they are as sinful creatures met by this loving God, the encounter changes them. 'A new regenerate man will arise in the act of this acknowledgement as the man whom God has addressed and who hears God,' says Barth – the person who by faith given in the person of the Spirit has been brought to knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as the 'new human'. In this encounter, faith 'conforms' creatures to God, giving them eyes to see God and who they are in him. They are, in Barth's terms, 'bracketed' by this real experience of knowing God by being known. This is a 'mutual indwelling or union of the divine and human possibility' in which the human creature is set free for *real experience* – to be fully human in knowledge of and relation to God.⁴⁸⁶ This is to be set free for 'epistemic participation' by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's epistemic communion with the Father.⁴⁸⁷ It is also to be set free to live and articulate one's witness *as the Church* in ontological participation with the Triune God, having been reconciled and reconstituted to God.

⁴⁸⁵ C.D. 1.1, 193, 199.

⁴⁸⁶ C.D. 1.1, 246.

⁴⁸⁷ Torrance, "The Trinity," 73.

This is the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. God exists as the unknowable and unspeakable Lord. Yet this same God objectifies himself as 'Other' in his personal Word of address to humanity, which is also humanity's word of renewal and recreation. It follows that if creaturely response to God's Word depended on human ability, the Word would go unanswered. But this disregards the Spirit, something Barth does not do any more than Johnson. Rather, Barth maintains that the fact that Word spoken by God obtains a human response depends upon the Spirit's work of response in and through human beings. If we are to receive God's revelation, then it is necessary for this self-objectification to be accompanied by another – the Spirit – through whom God indwells us directly and creates in us the subjective conditions for receiving the Word that he speaks. The Spirit creates in us faith and obedience, the proper relational response of humanity to God.

This means that faith is the way of knowing. Faith is neither a static commodity given to us, somehow added to our mental faculties which enables us always to have access to spiritual realities, nor is it a renewed alteration of our natural state, so that we now have a natural capacity to know God whereas before we did not. In short is not an 'entitative' alteration of our essential humanity, as Johnson (and Rahner) would have it. Rather, it is a miraculous alteration of our ability to perceive, to hear and know the Word *as God*. This is a gift given by the Spirit as a condition of being made a new creation, being ontologically reconstituted 'in Christ', participating in the new humanity of Christ and in the communion of the Triune God. 'As the Spirit responds to the Word through human beings, human beings participate through the Spirit in the life of the Trinity and thus are reborn into fellowship with God (Jn 3:4). Apart from the Spirit's intervention,

even accurate knowledge of Jesus is not enough to allow an adequate response to God's Word (Acts 18:24-19:7). This is not to say that the Spirit subverts or displaces our humanity, for here, too, the ontological distinction between human and divine is maintained'.⁴⁸⁸

Barth insists that in this event God is the Subject from first to last.⁴⁸⁹ God acts 'from above',⁴⁹⁰ securing what must happen on both sides of the knowing relation. 'The Word creates the fact that we hear the Word Up there with Him it is possible for it to be possible down here with us'.⁴⁹¹ God personally opens himself to us in order to be known as only persons can and must.⁴⁹² As wholly other Creator, He is also the one who adopts and adapts both us as recipients and the media of revelation, establishing the 'analogy of faith' that enables participation in this knowing relation. When God speaks, those to whom he speaks are not left in any doubt about the matter. The Holy Spirit draws us in a supremely self-involving way into the presence and knowledge of a wholly and holy Other whose reality and claim upon us are self-authenticating within this encounter.

⁴⁸⁸ Ian McFarland, "Christ, Spirit and Atonement," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3:1 (March 2001): 83-93, 91-2. 'God's action in the Spirit is not to be understood on analogy with a created cause that limits our freedom; on the contrary, the Spirit's action – as the action of the God who establishes us as creatures with our own integrity in distinction from God – constitutes our response as a manifestation of freedom, in line with Paul's claim that God's Spirit bear[s] witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom. 8:15-16). In this sense, the doctrine of the Trinity speaks fundamentally of God in relation to creation without holding a necessary unity between the two. Rather, Scripture, tradition, creedal confessions and the historically Trinitarian structure of worship presuppose just the opposite. God's loving relation to his creation is utterly free and gracious. The Biblical understanding of God's covenantal relation to his people, and that of the New Covenant ushering in the renewal of all creation through God's Self-gift of grace and reconciliation, only makes sense if the integrity of God and the world are each upheld. This affirmation of God's immanence in the world is understood primarily and supremely in and from the person and work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁸⁹ C.D. I.1, 296; C.D. I.2, 1.

⁴⁹⁰ C.D. I.1, 242.

⁴⁹¹ C.D. I.2, 247.

⁴⁹² 'This is not to suggest', states Torrance, 'however, that the *human* concept of personhood is basic to a proper theology. Rather, it is to say that the personal nature of God, as this is defined for us *a posteriori* in and through the Act of God, is essential to the possibility of theology. It also leads to the affirmation that the liberation, or rather, recreation of human beings for personhood is the subsequent condition at the human level of the epistemic communion which stems from this free act of God's grace'. *Persons in Communion*, 36.

Thus, 'In the Holy Spirit we are confronted by what we cannot deny even if we wanted to do so'.⁴⁹³

Asking what this God must be like who is able to make himself known in this particular way, Barth arrives at a doctrine of the immanent Trinity. In other words, God's self-revealing in this *already* differentiated threefold form is *not itself* the occasion for the self-differentiation. Rather, it is the 'unveiling' of a logically and ontologically prior self-differentiation in God in which his freedom to be for us in this way is grounded.⁴⁹⁴ Hence we can say that it is out of the free overflow of love *for the other* that constitutes the Triune God as three persons in unique, perichoretic relation that God chose to create the world and to draw humanity into relation to himself. 'Because God in His one nature is not solitary but different (*verschieden*) in His modes of existence, because He is the Father who has an only-begotten Son, therefore the fact that He can be free for others, that He can be free for a reality different from Himself, is eternally grounded within God Himself'.⁴⁹⁵ In other words, God is able to enter history without ceasing to be what eternally he is, 'precisely because there is already hypostatic differentiation within the Godhead. Thus the form and content of revelation are utterly integrated. What is 'known' is the pattern indwelt by participants in the event of revelation, a pattern which is itself grounded in the mystery of God's eternal triune identity'.⁴⁹⁶

Hence we have from Barth the original source of Rahner's axiom (improperly equating and thus collapsing the immanent and economic Trinity):⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ C.D. I.2, 246.

⁴⁹⁴ Hart, "Revelation," 50.

⁴⁹⁵ C.D. I.2, 34

⁴⁹⁶ Hart, "Revelation," 50.

⁴⁹⁷ Again, Johnson further alters the meaning of this axiom to ultimately equate the economic Trinity with one's personal experiences of 'salvation'.

'[W]e have consistently followed the rule, which we regard as basic, that statements about the divine modes of being antecedently in themselves cannot be different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation. All our statements concerning what is called the immanent Trinity have been reached simply as confirmations of underlinings or, materially, as the indispensable premises of the economic Trinity. They neither could nor would say anything other than that we must abide by the distinction and unity of the modes of being in God as they encounter us according to the witness of Scripture in the reality of God in His revelation ... the reality of God which encounters us in his revelation is his reality in all the depths of eternity'.⁴⁹⁸

In short, there is no dichotomy between God's being *a se* and his 'becoming' God for us *ad extra* articulated in Trinitarian discourse. Interpreting God's work of salvation as a process whereby the dialogue 'among' or 'within' the three Persons extends outside the Godhead and includes us as hearers, we can say that

The Word that God speaks eternally within God is spoken outward to creatures in the life and ministry of Jesus, so that the creature may share in God's life by responding to that Word. As God's own eternal form of self-expression, the Word is an appropriate means for bringing that which is not God into communion with God (Jn 1:3-4, 10-11; cf. Col. 1:15-17) – and yet the biblical witness makes clear that even Jesus' closest followers were unable to hear and respond to this Word adequately on their own ... making it clear that the Word God addressed to human beings is beyond the power of human comprehension.⁴⁹⁹

The fact that we have no natural propensity toward or aptitude for God would, of course, be the end of the story and the ultimate endorsement of the agnostic, pluralist point of view that Johnson endorses were it not for the fact that this same God has made himself 'objectively' known – in short, he has named himself historically and concretely within the realm of human experience. God has spoken concerning himself. It is on this basis and this basis alone that the Church may speak about God from its ontological reality established in and by God. The mode of theological statements is one in which they refer beyond themselves and beyond the particular framework of the belief structure of the Christian community to the reality of God himself.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ C.D. I.1, 479.

⁴⁹⁹ McFarland, "Christ, Spirit and Atonement," 91.

⁵⁰⁰ For a helpful discussion of Barth's approach to theological language, see George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," in *Disruptive Grace* (see n. 474), 210-225.

They can do this, however, only because God himself has taken *human language* and commandeered it into the service of his self-revealing and redemptive gospel. In this sense, Barth considered the *language* of Christian speech to be anything *but* isolated, 'higher glossolalia'. Rather, language is 'shaped in *form and content by the creaturely nature* of the world'; however, it is also '*conditioned by the limitations of humanity*', i.e., its sinfulness.⁵⁰¹ Thus, Barth does not argue that it is inappropriate that revelation be spoken in this language. His concern is with what creates that possibility. The possibility is not inherent in such language. Rather, its possibility is given by God who freely Self-reveals in the commandeering of such language. In short, language doesn't grasp revelation; revelation grasps human language, and in so doing brings about its true essence.

Once grasped, however, this language only makes sense within this particular faith community as the place where God has made and makes himself known. To those outside, it remains a scandal, an enigma, an oppressive and totalising system, vulnerable to rejection and mockery.⁵⁰² Hence the Church's proclamation of the Triune God cannot be set alongside other alternative models or ways of understanding as 'one view of' or 'one route to' God among many. As reflection on what God has spoken, this rules out as valid options either agnosticism or the categorical substitution of religious constructs. The Church can do only what it is called *into being* to do; namely, to bear witness to God's Self-revelation. This Self-revealing, when it happens, does not allow itself to be treated with indifference, or to be understood as one 'religious option' among many. To set it alongside human religion, or compare it with the products of human religious

⁵⁰¹ Barth, *CD*, 1.1, 339-45. See also Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 7-15.

⁵⁰² 1 Cor 1:18-3:20.

endeavor, is simply to misunderstand its true nature as revelation of the Triune God present among us.⁵⁰³

Hence, the human experience of the Triune God is 'conditioned' experience, as it were. It is a miracle of grace, in which the human being is reconciled to God and reconstituted to be able to perceive what she could not otherwise perceive. And that form of perception is nothing less than *koinonia* – participation – 'a form of existence characterized by an event of recognition and acknowledgement which is identical with participation within the church'.⁵⁰⁴ Thus, transcendental self-experience of what one might call 'God' or abstracted experiences (negative and positive) of 'Spirit' – as Johnson would have it – are not considered to be the experience of the Holy Spirit given to and thus constituting believers as such.

Trinitarian Doctrine or Relational Ontology?

Barth states, 'The form here is essential to the content, that is, God is unknown as our Father, as the Creator, to the degree that He is not made known by Jesus'.⁵⁰⁵ Johnson takes to heart the relation between form and content. Thus, in order to be 'free' from God's Self-revealing Triune description, she consciously offers different content to correspond with her symbolically relational 'forms' of 'divine mystery'. Hence she starts with 'a knowledge of God which is not mediated completely by an encounter with Jesus Christ'; rather, women's experience mediates an 'unthematic and anonymous ...

⁵⁰³ Hart, "Barth, the Trinity and Pluralism," 131-32.

⁵⁰⁴ Torrance, "The Trinity," 73. *C.D.* I.1, 214-15. 'To this end we return again to the beginning. We are dealing with the possibility of knowledge of God's Word ... For the Word of God is the criterion of the Church, Church proclamation and dogmatics. ... If we cling to what we can affirm and investigate as the human acknowledgement of God's Word, to what can be experienced in Christian experience, where shall we find there the criterion by which to distinguish this experience from others, the authentic from the inauthentic? What is there here to stop us interpreting everything in terms of the religious, the cultural, the human generally, or finally indeed the biological (*C.D.* I.1, 217)?'

⁵⁰⁵ *C.D.* I.1, 390.

knowledge of God'⁵⁰⁶ as relational being.⁵⁰⁷ And, since God is first 'the incomprehensible mystery – which is . . . the possibility of grasping and comprehending *anything*, the all-encompassing incomprehensibility of the Whole, *no matter how it is named*',⁵⁰⁸ Johnson feels free to name this relational mystery 'Sophia'. Sophia exists primarily in threefold relation to the world and so can be thought of secondarily and indirectly as being threefold in essence.

Agnosticism clearly prevails in Johnson's thinking – something she considers an asset. Despite her use of terminology that implies knowledge of God with specific meaning within the context of her Church tradition, she continually steps outside of that belief system and ontological frame of reference – what we might term 'Triune, epistemic participation' – and states that God cannot be known as the Subject and Object of Christian revelation. She does this, as we have seen, by equating Kantian unknowability with the traditional Christian understanding of divine incomprehensibility or apophysis. For instance, she not only interprets Aquinas in this light but Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, all of whom 'saw clearly that God's unlikeness to

⁵⁰⁶ However, both Scripture and tradition maintain that we do not have this. Rather, Christians have *thematic* knowledge of the Triune God through faith by God's gracious Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. 'Christians cannot simply assume that their experiences are experiences of the transcendent God without making the Creator indistinguishable from the creature'. Molnar, "Can We Know God Directly?" 247.

⁵⁰⁷ *Foundations*, 13, 21. God's name and 'thematic' revelation in Jesus Christ are important, but they are *secondary*. They must at all times be 'sustained by a previous, unthematic, transcendental relatedness of our whole intellectuality to the incomprehensible Infinite'. Rahner, cited by Kelly in *Karl Rahner*, 36.

⁵⁰⁸ Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4:6. Molnar observes, 'It is amazing that Rahner, who is so famous for having reoriented Catholic theology toward the importance of the Trinity, has himself methodologically ignored the most significant point of that doctrine completely. ...Clearly, Rahner's abstract understanding of God as the term of our transcendent dynamisms yields a concept of God that is at variance with the very heart of what is or should be understood in light of the trinitarian self-revelation of God the Father [of Jesus Christ known in faith through the Holy Spirit]. And although Barth is today frequently criticized for overstressing the *analogia entis* as a problem, the fact is that it is the *analogia entis* or the attempt to find God apart from Christ that really is the problem here' ("Christology and the Trinity," in *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* [see n. 195] 51-50).

the world is total, so that we know best when we affirm that we do not know, which in itself is a religious kind of knowing'.⁵⁰⁹

This, however, places her either in the position of knowing *more* than God and the witness of the Christian community, or, in Barth's terms, of not acknowledging revelation through participation – in the sense that 'In the Holy Spirit we are confronted by what we cannot deny even if we wanted to do so'.⁵¹⁰ Or, perhaps more accurately, it illuminates the conflict she faces in having an identity grounded in conflicting communities with competing claims and worldviews – modern feminism, contemporary American Catholicism and the traditional Roman Catholic Christian Church.

While this might sound strident, Johnson is writing specifically to 'reform' *Christian* doctrine at its very heart – the doctrine of God as Triune and God's relation to the world. In so doing, she has already made a judgment on the Church's witness. She does not believe that we can say that the Triune God is the One who in Scripture is Self-revealed and Self-named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact, she believes that (1) this is affirmed to be 'analogically' impossible in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions,⁵¹¹ and (2) such an historical, Scriptural confession is idolatrous.⁵¹² However, this kind of statement on her part is illogical since Johnson defines her theological identity *within* the Church – the ontological being and identity of which is given in and by this Triune Reality. It places her outside the claims of the very community that she

⁵⁰⁹ *SWI*, 108.

⁵¹⁰ *C.D.* I.2, 246. Even once this has happened, however, we still cannot lay hold of the creaturely 'stuff' of revelation (Jesus, Scripture, preaching) and thereby 'have' God's Word, as it were. Precisely because revelation is an event, a relationship that "straddles objectivity and subjectivity" and through which we effectively participate in the triune life of God, it is ever new as God meets us in his free act of grace.

⁵¹¹ *SWI*, 116-117.

⁵¹² *SWI*, 18, 36, 40, 45.

purports to be reforming, making the statement meaningless. But what does she offer in its place? What can we say about God as 'Trinity'?

God as a *Vestigium Trinitatis*

In a strange twist on the *vestigia trinitatis* (the assumption being that 'trinitarian' traces in creation hint at God's Triunity), Johnson somehow makes the Trinity a *vestigium trinitatis*. God is not *the* Trinity. On the apparent assumption that 'trinity' represents certain relational concepts (e.g., mutuality, *perichoresis*) in abstraction from their original meaning derived from speaking about God's being, Johnson argues that God is merely 'like a Trinity'. The presupposition is that something other than the Triune God will give form and content to this 'symbolic concept', and then it will be imposed externally on God. For Johnson, that 'something other' is women's relationality. Women become the vessels through which divine relationality is best manifest in the world, and thus their relations give form to the content of her relational ontology.

Johnson provides multiple female 'trinitarian' images of self-giving love using 'perichoretic', panentheistic language. However, '[w]hat is modeled in this language', she explains, is not God. Rather, it 'is the exuberant dignity and life-giving power of women, for here divine mystery, darkly known through creation, salvation, and the ongoing dialectic of presence and absence, appears in female gestalt, and divine blessing comes as a female gift'.⁵¹³ Clearly, the personal content given to the triune symbol here does not derive first from God's being except on the metaphysical assumption that women participate in being and that their existential relationality reveals divine being as such. But on what basis are we to assume this? Why should we believe that this is the

⁵¹³ *SWI*, 215.

locus of divine relationality in the world? How does Johnson know that this is true? Are all women's relationships indicative of what Johnson posits to be characteristic of divine relationality (mutual, reciprocal, self-giving, equal, 'perichoretic')? Surely not, even in an ideal world, simply because not all relationships between women are voluntary friendships (e.g., a mother and her infant or autistic daughter, two females in a psychologically and/or physically and/or sexually abusive relationship). From a transcendental perspective, must she not simply assent to relationality as an expression of *human* experience? And if so, this raises the question, what experience becomes normative? (This theological conundrum becomes all the more pressing when posed by her womanist, *mujerista* and post-structuralist feminist counterparts who refuse to have both divine and human distinction and experience determined by her prevailing categories.)

Though she describes classical and feminist thought as 'vigorously coalescing' at the point of Trinitarian theology precisely because they 'share' these concepts of mutuality, reciprocity and equality in relation, she fails to recognize that these concepts have a particular kind of content *already* given in the Trinitarian revelation and in the Church's ontological participation in this very communion. She did not find them first in feminist thought and then happen upon them in Christian tradition. In fact the opposite occurred.⁵¹⁴ Nevertheless, in order to *integrate* them (based on both a false communion of persons and a false wedding of beliefs) first, she must summarily dismiss both the form and the content of Christian Trinitarian theology. Second, she uses what she considers an abstract or 'empty' form (e.g., threefoldness, mutual interrelation as a *vestigium trinitatis*) and replaces the content with experience.

⁵¹⁴ In Johnson's early writing she refers to 'those in feminist theology' as one still outside its ranks.

The ambiguity of the symbol surfaces at a critical point in Johnson's 'trinitarian discourse' – just as she tries to distinguish her position as different from both Rahner, and Moltmann and Boff. Despite the fact that we cannot know that God is three persons in relation in a sense that would support a strong doctrine of the immanent Trinity, hence 'the Trinity' is only a symbol, we *can* know that relationality is *the essential reality*, that women's experience reveals it, and that it looks 'like a Trinity'. 'The symbol of the Trinity thus intends to safeguard *the reality of liberating experience* both as *given by God*, and as *giving* the one true God'.⁵¹⁵

Johnson seems to be arguing that, in a transcendently cyclical sense, women's liberating *experience gives content* to the *symbol* of God. Yet it is the unknowable *God* who is also *given* in their experience. This in turn validates the content of the symbol, and so on. On one hand, Johnson implies that the symbol is derived from experience. On the other hand, she continually argues that the symbol 'functions' in an idealistic way to point us toward what we have not yet seen. For instance, she criticises Moltmann and Boff's social trinitarian models for being 'too sanguine' precisely because they assume *too much* from experience. In short, history has not provided much in the way of egalitarian community to model after. Though these models might work in theory – i.e., 'the liberating *possibility* of the social model of the Trinity *points in the right direction*' – she nevertheless believes 'we *have not yet had* the historical experience of an integral, harmonious society *upon which this model is predicated*'.⁵¹⁶ How is it that the symbol

⁵¹⁵ *SWI*, 199 (emphasis added).

⁵¹⁶ *SWI*, 209. If we haven't yet experienced this, then how do we know the symbol is 'pointing in the right direction'? Or, if as she claims elsewhere, *women* have experienced this kind of human community, are they then the universal referent for divine and human community? Johnson claims that 'If mutual and equal communion is the very nature of divine mystery, then this sets the norm for a pattern of relationships among persons' ("God," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 130). What is missing from this statement is the transcendental link between knowing and being. Technically, the only reason we *know* this to be the

(derived from experience) can function both in an *a priori* manner to shape a future experiential reality and *a posteriori* to reflect that experienced reality? In either case, the symbol represents the experiencing community, not God, unless we assume with Johnson that God is passively, indirectly 'given' in our ontological make-up and thus 'known' in our existential experience. Again the questions surface, 'why should one's self-experience be assumed to be a concomitant experience of divine relationality?', 'how can human experience both reveal the 'relational God' and 'point to' the unknowable God?' and 'which 'relational experience is normative'?

In his review of Johnson's trinitarian theology, Charles Marsh offers a similar critique, based on Johnson's argument that her 'trinitarian symbol' has the power to evoke 'the livingness in God' but only as 'a *secondary concept* that synthesizes the concrete of experience of salvation' and the human experience of mutual relation.⁵¹⁷ This leads Marsh to state, 'Johnson seems unclear on the critical matter of whether mutual or agapeic relation is primary to God and secondary to genuine human relation, or primary to genuine human relation and then (somehow) metaphorically invigorated by the symbol of the Trinity'.⁵¹⁸ Whether she means to or not, in the end 'her primary commitment to experience compromises her ability to explicate the Trinity as a mystery that patterns human social and moral experience. The very reverse is implied: human social and moral experience, that is, women's emancipation from patriarchy and their flourishing in full humanity, patterns our thinking about the Trinity'.⁵¹⁹ Marsh continues:

There is no inner logic or grammar in the triune mystery; or, stated differently, whatever inner logic or grammar we attribute to the Trinity is given through extrinsic sources, whether these be

'nature of divine mystery' is because we *are* its existential, symbolic Self-expression. Why then the need for a functioning symbol?

⁵¹⁷ *SWI*, 198.

⁵¹⁸ Marsh, "Two Models," 62.

⁵¹⁹ "Two Models," 63.

derived from liberation vocabularies, social ontologies or aesthetic categories. In this manner, Johnson's feminist revision is methodologically no less indebted to modern liberal theology than if she privileged morality, affectivity, thought, or some other mode of experience. While the content of her revision may be feminist, the form has its systematic origins in Hegel and Schleiermacher.⁵²⁰

Johnson is compelled to look away from the Triune God of the Christian faith to find ways to talk about God's relationality. Paradoxically, she attempts to use the language of God's Triune being and the being of the Church *in abstracto*. The result, we would argue, is that her Trinitarian relational ontology is never more than a *vestigium trinitatis*. It is a concept grounded in creation and circling back to creation without ever being drawn into the circle of God's Self-knowing and Self-giving. She claims that, in particular regard to the Trinity, 'All of our thinking moves from the world to God, and can never move in the opposite direction' – *and* that this has always been the case, both for contemporary and *first century* 'believers'.⁵²¹

What believers is Johnson referring to here? Surely it is not the Church, whose ontological being is derived from the very Triune being and *koinonia* that she rejects, and whose creedal and doxological form and content are shaped by this ontological Reality. Is she referring to those who believe in her Trinitarian symbol? This cannot be the case, for if 'unknowable' mystery is available to everyone in their transcendental experience and is ultimately definable by individual creaturely existence, then just as 'God' cannot be equated with the immanent Trinity of the Christian faith, it cannot be equated with one woman's idea of Sophia-God, despite her insistence on its being a 'right way to speak about God'. Who, or what, then, do these 'believers' *believe* in?

⁵²⁰ "Two Models," 63.

⁵²¹ *SWT*, 199; here she cites Schoonenberg.

No 'Persons' in Relation

To ask about God as the Subject of Trinitarian theology is, argues Barth, the question at the heart of the doxological and confessional life of the Church. It is to speak of the tri-personal God of love, Father, Son and Spirit. God is not Father because he is creation's Father but because he is Father to the Son, just as the Son's identity is given in his relation to the Father. Both Jesus Christ and the Father testify to this within human experience through the Spirit (Mt 3:17; 12:18; 16:17). In Scripture the Spirit is both the 'Spirit of God' and the 'Spirit of Christ', sent from the Father and the Son (Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19; Gal 4:6; 1 Thess 4:8; Jn 14:16; 16:7; Acts 2:33). The Spirit and the Son are *homoousion* with the Father. As One God, each 'person' indwells the other without separation and yet without loss of distinction. In Johnson's relation ontology however, the ontological priority of a relational principle replaces the ontological priority of the Triune persons in unique, perichoretic relation.

First, Johnson's Trinitarian names are not reality-depicting metaphors that describe the relations between 'Mother-Sophia', 'Jesus-Sophia' and 'Spirit-Sophia'. These metaphors describe God's necessary, threefold, emanationist relation *to the world*. For instance, 'Mother-Sophia' derives her identity as such not from her relation to Jesus-Sophia *first* as her envoy. Rather, she is 'Mother-Creator', 'the mother of the universe, the unoriginate, living source of all that exists'.⁵²² The Spirit, who can be spoken of whenever 'Mother' is spoken of ('friend, sister, mother and grandmother of the world'),⁵²³ is not the 'other hand' of the 'Mother' as it were. The Spirit is the emanation of divine

⁵²² *SWI*, 179-181.

⁵²³ *SWI*, 146.

relationality from its Unoriginate Source. So, too, Jesus is described as Sophia's 'breath' or 'emanation'.⁵²⁴

Because Johnson uses these kinds of metaphors, and because she has tied herself to the concept of relationality in speaking about God, she nevertheless speaks of 'persons' in relation and claims to assume three *hypostases* throughout her theological exploration.⁵²⁵ Noting the semantic drift of the word 'person' throughout theological history, she stresses that analogy frees God from being 'a person in the modern sense' so that its use is 'in fact, improper'.⁵²⁶ Just like the words 'one' and 'three', the word 'person' in the trinitarian symbol is 'not intended to denote anything positive in God, but to remove something' – in this case, 'singleness', thus affirming 'a communion in God'.⁵²⁷ Transcending our understanding, God is not 'less than personal', but God is 'interpersonal and transpersonal in an unimaginably rich way'.⁵²⁸ Similar to Moltmann, Johnson argues that 'The [triune] persons are persons precisely *as* mutual relations and not as anything apart from their mutual bonding. Relationality is the principle that at once constitutes each trinitarian person as unique and distinguishes one from another. ...Holy Wisdom *is* a mystery of real, mutual relations ... there is no absolute divine person.

⁵²⁴ *SWI*, 168-9.

⁵²⁵ *SWI*, 211.

⁵²⁶ *SWI*, 203.

⁵²⁷ *SWI*, 203-4. In Torrance's critique of Rahner's Trinitarian theology, he notes two problems for Rahner – problems that arguably carry over into Johnson's loss of Triune personhood. First, the meaning of the Trinitarian phrase 'three persons' is derived 'subsequent to' our experience of salvation-history. Second, Rahner asserts that 'there is properly no mutual love between Father and Son, for this would presuppose two acts ... there is only *one* self-utterance of the Father, the Logos. The Logos is not the one who utters, but the one who is uttered'. Hence within the Trinity 'there is no reciprocal "Thou"'. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 105. Torrance states, 'Rahner's denial of the mutual loving and reciprocal personal address within the Triunity raises the question as to how seriously he is committed *in practice* to the two-way identification of the immanent and economic Trinities and what the hypostatic union specifically involves with respect to the unique hypostasis of the Son'. *Persons in Communion*, 276.

⁵²⁸ *SWI*, 203.

There are only the relative three'.⁵²⁹ Thus, '[t]he category of relation thus serves as a heuristic tool for bringing to light not just the mutuality of trinitarian persons but the very nature of the holy mystery of God herself. ... At the heart of holy mystery is not monarchy but community; not an absolute ruler, but a threefold *koinonia*'.⁵³⁰

Her relational ontology, however, seems to subsume the persons into the relations. Because her 'relational' model is 'relational' primarily for the sake of the world and only derivatively relational *a se* (and this is an agnostic hope at best), there are no true *hypostases* whose relational outpouring for and from *one another* is the basis of creation and reconciling communion. While she affirms Moltmann's social trinity at key points, she fails to resist the reduction of the concept 'person' to the concept 'relation', something Moltmann (with Lossky and Zizioulas) fights against as he stresses the absolute hypostatic diversity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁵³¹ If this is so, however, to whom is she referring when she speaks of the 'trinitarian persons'? Is this strictly metaphorical language drawn from human experience, and thus univocal, or merely 'as if' or 'like' in a thoroughly agnostic sense? Or is there only one divine 'I', the interchangeable Spirit-Sophia, Creator-Spirit, Mother Creator and Mother-Sophia? Is "SHE" the monistic source of divine-human relationality or part of the larger monistic matrix of Relational Being, a word for which Johnson is still waiting?⁵³²

⁵²⁹ *SWI*, 216, 218.

⁵³⁰ *SWI*, 227, 216.

⁵³¹ See Hart's discussion in "Person and Prerogative in Perichoretic Perspective," in *Regarding Karl Barth* (see n. 235) 110-11.

⁵³² Molnar argues that because God is supremely and utterly independent of creation and not subject to the limitation of created being, including (per Barth) forms of "reciprocal presence, communion and fellowship between other beings", 'he cannot become the predicate in a sentence in which the subject is relationality as defined through an ontology which comprehends both divine and human experience', i.e., one like Johnson's. "Karl Barth and the Current Discussion," in *Divine Freedom*, 130.

'There is no divine nature as a fourth thing that grounds divine unity in difference apart from relationality'.⁵³³ True, but unity in difference in the Trinity is established through the divine persons in relation, not person-less relations in the abstract. If there are no 'others' to constitute difference, then what constitutes 'relationality'? If there are no persons, what constitutes 'relation' – given that this is understood from the category of women's *interpersonal* relationships? As Johnson states 'The ontological priority of relation in the idea of the triune God has a powerful affinity with women's ownership of relationality as a way of being in the world'.⁵³⁴ This lack of personhood in Johnson's relational ontology raises problems for her both as a theologian and as a feminist. Both God's personal, wholly distinct nature and our renewed personhood in relation to the personal God are essential to Christian theology.⁵³⁵ In feminist theology, it is precisely in order that *personal distinction* is not lost, subsumed or commandeered by the identity of the other in relation that mutuality, reciprocity and equality are such key values. This is to rob the manifestation or experiential source of relation – women in relation – of their personhood, and leaves the '*vestigia*' of the Trinity empty as well.

Blurring the God-World Distinction

As Johnson's agnosticism forces her to replace a doctrine of the Immanent Trinity with an ontology of divine 'immanence', she describes Sophia's relation to the world using images of gestation-birth-life and *perichoresis*. Both of these are ultimately models

⁵³³ *SWI*, 227.

⁵³⁴ *SWI*, 216.

⁵³⁵ In Torrance's discussion of the use of the term 'person' in Trinitarian discourse, he concludes: 'our judgment here is a contingent one – there is no 'absolute' need to use the term 'person' with respect to the members of the Trinity. But there is an absolute obligation, however, for our language-games to participate as effectively as possible in the triune dynamic which claims them [including our ecclesial participation]. It is this that must be the all-controlling concern of theological description as a whole'. *Persons in Communion*, 335.

of interpenetration or mutual coinherence. Johnson posits 'an intrinsic relatedness between God and the world as a loving relationality that belongs to the very essence of being a mother and never ends'.⁵³⁶ Again, the metaphor of 'Mother' is grounded in God's necessary relation to the world. This, however, exposes Johnson to an essential monism – one that does not seem to concern her, however, as she illustrates her point from process thinker Penelope Washbourn:

"...the idea of 'oneself' as having absolute boundaries can no longer be sustained in pregnancy. 'I' am the 'other' and the 'other' is 'me'. ... In all recent research on pregnancy the dramatic interrelationship between fetus and mother is demonstrated and the use of any drugs, even aspirin, can be detrimental ... There is no human experience, even coitus, as able as pregnancy to illustrate what is often obscured by our apparent separateness: we are essentially interrelated to one another."⁵³⁷

This apparent celebration of a virtual loss of distinction sets up a serious challenge for Johnson's commitment to maintain that God is 'wholly other' in transcendent mystery, or that Sophia is 'radically distinct' from the world while profoundly related to it.⁵³⁸ This raises the question as to whether she does not expose herself to Elizabeth Achtemeier's critique of panentheistic feminist theology (which invariably uses female imagery for God). Achtemeier argues that this theology both eliminates the Christian Creator-creature distinction and, by its incorporation of birthing imagery, ends up reflecting the 'circular' view of creation found in the ancient fertility and goddess religions.⁵³⁹ Indeed, says Achtemeier, 'when female terminology is used for

⁵³⁶ 'Here', says Paul Molnar, '*relationality has become God* while the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been relegated to the domain of freely chosen metaphor'. "The Purpose of the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity," 25.

⁵³⁷ "The Dynamics of Female Experience: Process Models and Human Values," in *Feminism and Process Thought*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1981), 83-105, 93, cited in *SWI*, 298n27.

⁵³⁸ *SWI*, 168.

⁵³⁹ Achtemeier explains how such belief is identical to the 'myopoethic' thought prior to the advent of the Judeo-Christian faith: 'The natural world reflected the life of the divine, and by harmonizing with that world and influencing it through cultic ritual, human beings entered into the "Primal Matrix" of all life and used it to their advantage'. For instance, Ruether's metaphor of 'the Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, Gods and humans, sky and earth, human and non-human beings are generated' is *not* just a metaphor, argues Achtemeier, but also 'divine reality'; 'the empowering Matrix: She, in whom we live and move and have our being – She comes: She is here'. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 48-9, cited in

God, the birthing image becomes inevitable ... If a female deity gives birth to the universe, however, it follows that all things participate in the life or in the substance and divinity of that deity -- in short, that *the creator is indissolubly bound up with the creation*': The result is that human beings are so divinized through their ontological participation in the divine, says Achtemeier, that creator and creation are undivided.⁵⁴⁰

The same problem occurs in Johnson's use of the friendship metaphor, which she equates with *perichoresis*, the mutual coinherence or ontological interpenetration of two entities. Here we encounter two problems in Johnson's use of this metaphor. First of all, to speak of *perichoresis* is to predicate a particular, non-generic level of ontological unity between the Triune persons which could never be predicated of human persons in relation'.⁵⁴¹ Even were it to have some generic meaning abstracted from these persons, it is logically and physiologically impossible, and such a 'commingling' of human persons would fly in the face of all that it means to be a person whose distinction is in relation. Hence, when Johnson states that '[p]erichoretic movement summons up the idea of all three distinct persons existing in each other ...[as] an excellent model for human interaction in freedom',⁵⁴² it is difficult to understand how this is not in fact closer to

"Female Language for God," (see n. 142) 102-4. Roland Frye follows and develops Achtemeier's argument and includes his own critique of the feminist *Hokmah/Sophia* interpretation in "Language for God and Feminist Language." Johnson rejects Ruether's 'recycling scenario' in favour of a 'resurrection' view, though she is agnostic as to its content, in *Friends of God*, 195-7.

⁵⁴⁰ "Female Language for God," 100. Johnson's other specific attribute of Mother-Sophia is that of justice which, ironically but not surprisingly, is devoid of any sense of divine judgment. Such activity on the part of Mother-Sophia would place 'her' in authority over her creation, a relationship utterly rejected in Johnson's theology (e.g., *SWI*, 181). This, notes Achtemeier, is part and parcel with the lack of Creator-creature distinction: 'By eliminating the difference between Creator and creation, and by understanding themselves as incarnations of the divine, many feminists have declared their freedom from any sort of rule, including God's'. "Female Language for God," 109.

⁵⁴¹ Hart, "Person and Prerogative," 113-14. See also Randall Otto, "The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology," *SJT* 54 (2001): 366-84.

⁵⁴² *SWI*, 221.

'women submerged in the "all" of [another]' which she likens to pantheism and finds a 'suffocating deception'.⁵⁴³

Secondly, Johnson seems to follow Moltmann's panentheistic view of *perichoresis* in his assertion that God's perichoretic unity is open to what is not God. Likening divine *perichoresis* to a triple helix, she speaks of it twirling around 'in a never-ending series of moves, which includes human partners and their decisions for good or ill, toward the fullness of shalom for all creatures, human beings and the earth, especially the discarded'.⁵⁴⁴ But, as Trevor Hart asks,

Is the union with God in which men and women are drawn in to the very life of God, being granted to share in the eternal relation of the Son to the Father in the Spirit, really of the same sort as that union in which Father, Son and Spirit perichoretically inhere in one another? Surely not. There is a distinction to be drawn here between two distinct strata of trinitarian ontology; between that in God which is participable by humans and that which is not; between what it means to be Son of God *kata physin* on the one hand, and *kata charin* on the other; between *koinonia* as an ontological category and *perichoresis*. The concept of *perichoresis* in its strong form says more than the concept *koinonia* (which it embraces). It is this crucial differentiation that the *homoousion* was intended to safeguard and we must do nothing to weaken it.⁵⁴⁵

Johnson undermines her *perichoretic* argument in the long run by joining it to the metaphor of 'friendship' as that which best exemplifies the Trinitarian relations and the divine-human relation.⁵⁴⁶ *Perichoresis* is a description of being, the hypostatic union of

⁵⁴³ *SWI*, 231.

⁵⁴⁴ This is also a restatement of Johnson's view of divine agency which only works actively through human agency in the world.

⁵⁴⁵ "Person and Prerogative," 114.

⁵⁴⁶ *SWI*, 195, 218. Richard Bauckham points out the serious problems involved in trying to hold together the very different ideas about the Trinity as (1) an interpersonal fellowship in which we, by grace, participate, and (2) a 'relational prototype' on which human community is to be modeled. The first idea implies that we are invited to experience the Trinitarian relationships from inside, and accounts for both the differentiated character of our relationship with the Trinitarian persons and the differentiated character of the relationships of the Trinitarian persons themselves. The second idea, however, implies that we are invited to stand *outside* this Triune participation and to view the Trinity as an external model of God that humans should reflect. 'The two ideas would be fairly easily compatible were we to think of the Trinity simply like a group of three friends who include us in their friendship as *yet more friends*'. But the second idea cannot be combined with the first. It fails to take into account the New Testament concept of the image of God through the Incarnation and to take seriously the reality of *koinonia* which ultimately flattens out Trinitarian difference and reduces our sense of the otherness of God. "Jürgen Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* and the Question of Pluralism," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (see n. 427) 155-164.

the persons of the Trinity who are actually One, which ontologically is impossible for humans; logically, it would eradicate their being. As an ontological category, *perichoresis* is also anything but voluntary. Friendship, as Johnson posits it, is a voluntary relation between equals and implies no ontological connection (even though 'the love of friendship is the very essence of God').⁵⁴⁷ However, the reason why this metaphor is so important for her is that it implies that while God is *asymmetrically* 'other than' humanity, God is not 'over' humanity as its Lord. God is alongside, with, in, and for the world in reciprocal, equal and mutual relation. In this way, God shares God's 'life' with the world. As Catherine LaCugna states, '*The [Trinitarian] life of God does not belong to God alone*'.⁵⁴⁸ God and the world are different but equal partners in free, perichoretic love and unity.

Such language, however, is contradictory. One cannot have a voluntary, necessary friendship. For God to enter into voluntarily in relation with creation reinstates the theistic view of 'no real relation' – the very relation which Johnson abhors. Thus, the voluntary aspect is an illusion. It actually undermines the essential feminist principle of necessary interrelation which requires a personal, free 'I' and 'thou' related only by choice. Assuming the metaphysical principle to be in operation, one wonders how Johnson believes this metaphor could possibly work in any case. How can God, the unknowable 'other' intuited only in one's self-experience, love a person and that person love God, as personal friends? How do they exist in a relationship of mutual distinction, freely and reciprocally outpouring ourselves for one another *as* 'others' in relation? To

⁵⁴⁷ *SWI*, 218.

⁵⁴⁸ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 1, 354. Original emphasis. Johnson states that it is precisely here, as women understanding themselves as a community of *equals* sharing in the being of God who is essentially this way, that feminist insight and classical theology 'vigorously coalesce', making for strange bedfellows!

whom does the human person give her love? How does she know that God loves her? Does God want her love? How does she know? How is God respected as a 'friend' when God has no Self-determining identity or freedom to relate on his own terms, i.e., *voluntarily*, rather than according to the cognitive demands or limitations of the human 'other'? How is that a friendship? Is that not 'lording over' of the worst kind, placing God in the position of the passive, dominated object?

Ultimately, there are no divine 'friends' in relation, or in Christian terms, there is no unique, perichoretic *koinonia* of divine persons entirely for one another *in love* whose love extends outward to embrace us and to welcome our loving response in return in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. What then distinguishes Johnson's models of gestation and perichoretic interpenetration for the divine-human relation as panentheistic and not simply pantheistic? What distinguishes them as Trinitarian?

No Love, No Freedom, No Integrity

For all her language regarding the Spirit's presence immanently 'drawing near', divine being is more or less passive or at least wholly conditioned by the natural world and human agency. God is not an active Subject. 'God' is simply 'divine relationality', the essence of which is manifest in the created order.⁵⁴⁹ As such divine relationality does not love human beings or receive (or want) their love in terms of 'I' and 'Thou'. Love is simply assumed to exist because creation exists and because of the love of human beings for one another.

⁵⁴⁹ 'Divine governance involves God in *waiting upon the world*, so to speak, *patiently acting through its natural processes* including unpredictable, uncontrollable random events to bring about the emergence of the new while consistently urging the whole toward fullness of life'. Johnson argues that it is not original sin but the evolutionary emergence of brain cells and nerves that produces 'suffering' — a 'terrifying consequence of the free play of randomness' that God's providential love nevertheless indwells. "Divine Providence and Chance," 17.

Although Johnson speaks of freedom as an essential element of the non-competitive, non-coercive relation between God and the world, she actually does not allow for it on multiple levels. God is not free from the constructs of the thinking creature to name himself, or to reveal or to act outside of Johnson's metaphysical principles, or to truly be the *super-natural* Creator.⁵⁵⁰ God is a conceptual 'object' totally dominated by every human subject. And since God's self-sufficiency is on the hand wholly unknowable and on the other, replaced by an abstract notion of relationality, God inevitably becomes confused with his creatures and their notions.

In short, divine relationality is not understood from the Triune being of God, in either an economic or immanent sense. God's relation to the world is not made manifest in his reconciling, incarnational presence in Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father and walks in the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit. Nor are the divine 'persons' in eternal relation to one another as God. With no shared love between them, however, God cannot be said to be complete in Triune aseity. This means that God actually needs the world to *be a relational God*.

And yet, it is precisely on the basis of God's Self-revelation that we know that God is eternally the Father, Son and Spirit *without the world*. The Christian view of God as relational is based on God's free relations *in se* and *ad extra*. Hence God is and remains freely Self-sufficient even when acting on our behalf. 'Unless that is true', states Molnar, 'the content of the concept of God is nothing more than a description of our necessary relations with others within the sphere of creation. ... [W]e cannot speak

⁵⁵⁰ 'Being, itself, must be denied any active role in regard to the knowing subject. For if being has an active, causative role in the process by which it becomes known, if it makes an active witness, this would imply that it has a dominating relation to the thinking subject'. Martin, *TFQ*, 184.

intelligibly about God's life with us unless the God of whom we speak is distinguishable from us and from our life with each other'.⁵⁵¹

Indeed, if we cannot say more than this, that God does not need the world in order to be God, then the integrity of both God and the world are in question. God's aseity is necessary for the integrity of the world, as well, for only a sovereign God who is independent of – while being wholly for – his creation can allow the world to have its own integrity and not simply be a function or extension of divine being.⁵⁵²

God is, indeed, our creator, so that we can say that the act of creation is not foreign to the way that he is as Father, Son and Spirit. But it is of the essence of God's freedom-in-relatedness that he is not bound to create. He would still be God if he had not created this world or any other. The distinction between the immanent and economic trinities implied in such an affirmation is important because it enables it to be said that although creation is indeed the work of God, yet because it is the *free* work of God, the world is by it enabled to be authentically itself.⁵⁵³

Gunton goes on to explain that this implies an absolute distinction between Trinitarian theism and pantheism, or arguably, panentheism if it implies a necessary relation:

Divine action as creation is saved from pantheism and necessitarianism by the way in which the action is conceived. Not only is creation through the Son, who is the mediator of God's self-relatedness to that which is not himself, but it is in the Spirit, which means by God's relation to it in otherness ... The stress on otherness is important because it reminds us that the immanence of God can be conceived in such a way as to deprive the creation of its independence and freedom. The more that God is conceived to be identified with the creation, or with parts of it, the more danger there is that it will be deprived of its own proper being. Pantheism is the extreme form of the denial of otherness.⁵⁵⁴

Arguing against any emanationist understanding of the divine-world relation, Robert Jenson makes the point that *we* do not set up the Creator/creature difference

⁵⁵¹ Molnar, "Karl Barth and the Current Discussion," 136n36; "The Purpose of a Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity," 4. A trinitarian theology that fails to recognise this is forced to ground knowledge in some other source and to collapse the immanent Trinity into that alternate source, such as experience. Gunton, Molnar and Thomas Weinandy, among others, criticise Catherine LaCugna as well for failing to do this by refusing to allow the doctrine of the immanent Trinity a genuine function in her thinking about God.

⁵⁵² Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 187.

⁵⁵³ Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 121. 'It is a terrible burden', says Gunton, 'for the world to be needed by God, to have to look, so to speak, over its shoulder all the time rather than simply being itself. This does not at all contradict the fact that the world is only truly itself when it seeks to give glory to God, for that is what gives it its final integrity'. *The Christian Faith*, 187-88.

⁵⁵⁴ *Christ and Creation*, 91.

through *any* set of our own concepts, e.g., transcendence v. immanence, eternity v. temporality, infinity v. finitude. Rather, God maintains the difference between Creator and creature ‘by taking action’.⁵⁵⁵ To understand the form of action that prevents his act of originating from being an event of emanating (so far as it can be understood at all) ‘we must start precisely with that one unitary agent who is, just as such, both Creator and creature. And we must start with him not in the abstract, as some God-man or other, but as the concrete protagonist of the story told by the Gospels’.⁵⁵⁶ In Trinitarian theology, we must start with Jesus Christ. He is the determining reality of the personal encounter between God and humanity, of the unique ‘personhood’ of God, of what it looks like for *God* to be for us and what it looks like to be a human being, recreated in love and free relation to God. We start with Immanuel, divine immanence truly personified.

This starting point, however, assumes that Jesus of Nazareth is *homoousion* as God’s Self-revelation, as witnessed to in Scripture and re-articulated in the Chalcedonian confession. What then, does Johnson’s Christological position bear witness to and what impact does it have on her relational ontology?

B. Christological Critique

Constructing the Christological Ladder

Johnson has attempted to present a relational ontology as contemporary Christian trinitarian theology without a clear affirmation of both the immanent and economic Trinity as the One God in three ‘persons’ whose names are reality-depicting metaphors signifying true, if incomprehensible, relations. This leaves questions as to what actually constitutes divine ‘relation’, i.e., *who* exactly is in relation and with *whom*, both at the

⁵⁵⁵ “Creator and Creature,” (see n.355) 217.

⁵⁵⁶ “Creator and Creature,” 221.

divine and human level. The immediate source of this ambiguity is the rejection of God as distinctly 'Other' in classically theistic terms. Ultimately, however, it centres around Johnson's understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, for it is here that God himself answers the 'who' question. Traditional Christology 'from above' assumes that in the person of Jesus Christ we have to do with the *Son of God as a human being* – the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity – and with him the centre of the divine-human relation as an act of ultimate reconciliation and recreation.

As Katherine Tanner has aptly stated, 'The direction in which one's theological inferences run – from or to Christ – has important consequences for one's understanding of the world as God's own'.⁵⁵⁷ For Barth, she notes that Christian beliefs about creation and providence are oriented *to Christ* simply because the world to which the Son of God comes is the Son's own world.⁵⁵⁸ Johnson's theological inferences, on the other hand, run *from* Jesus Christ – as the ultimate historical event of *human* transcendental and 'salvific' experience – *to* the rest of humanity and the world as co-participants in the divine. Although paradigmatic and symbolic, Jesus Christ is not *God's necessary, immanent* presence 'drawing near' and indwelling his creation for the sake of its salvation.⁵⁵⁹ Again, Christology is understood as fulfilled anthropology.⁵⁶⁰ From Johnson's perspective, the

⁵⁵⁷ "Creation and Providence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n. 11) 111-126, 111. As Tanner cites Barth, 'That is what the idea of creation for the sake of Christ and the claim that Christ is himself the one in and through whom the world is created are designed to make clear – there is no neutral place to stand with respect to the event of Jesus Christ (C.D. III/I, pp. 54, 67)'.

⁵⁵⁸ Barth contends that to start from a knowledge of the triune God in Christ (rather than the world) makes the world's existence questionable given the already constituted fullness of a triune God who has no need of it; 'the fact that it exists can only be the result of the pure grace of God's love for it displayed most fully in Christ'. Tanner, "Creation and Providence," 111.

⁵⁵⁹ In Johnson's book *Women, Earth, Creator Spirit*, - a short treatise that specifically connects the general concept of 'Spirituality' to her panentheistic concept of divine-cosmic interrelation – she never once refers to the Incarnation.

⁵⁶⁰ Colin Gunton states that if what Rahner means 'as some of his language suggests, that the transcendent humanity is the basis of the person of Christ, which becomes what it is by some kind of divine fulfillment ("by a free act from above"...), then he is indeed arguing strictly from below. Jesus' uniqueness consists in

net theological effect of the anthropological turn in Christology over the past century 'is a theology of God from below, with christology forming *one* of the major sources'.⁵⁶¹

Because of her strong desire to infuse a true sense of Jesus' humanity into a tradition that she considers sorely lacking in this regard and thus bordering on the irrelevant, Johnson's relation to the Chalcedonian confession is ambiguous. Chalcedon notwithstanding, the humanity of Christ has consistently proved difficult for orthodox Catholicism and thus has been lost or suppressed. Thus, she is reticent to say what the confession of the *homoousion* might mean except that it in no way compromises Jesus' humanity, and that it does not intend an essential connection between maleness and the mystery of God.⁵⁶²

Nevertheless, her negative critique a decade ago of the then current draft of the Roman Catholic *Universal Catechism* sheds some light: 'For all its good intentions it actually presents a neo-scholastic theology of Jesus Christ and redemption liberally salted with Scriptural prooftexts' with only 'pretensions toward modernity'.⁵⁶³ Her critique centres around the document's Chalcedonian confession of Christ's two natures. It

his being a unique and perfect example of humanity's openness to God. But to this it may be objected that unique and perfect humanity is unique and perfect humanity: the equivalent of the traditional 'sinlessness', but hardly equivalent to 'of one substance with the Father'. *Yesterday and Today*, 10-11.

⁵⁶¹ "Christology's Impact on the Doctrine of God," 158-9 (emphasis added). As we have seen, this decentralising position is fundamental to Rahner's Christology as well. Hunsinger notes that in rejecting the satisfaction theory attributed to Anselm, Rahner's transcendental anthropology and soteriology 'seems to establish with no need for direct reference to Christ'. "Baptized into Christ's Death: Karl Barth and the Future of Roman Catholic Theology," in *Disruptive Grace* (see n. 474), 253-78, 262. Or, as Badcock states, 'Christ is central in Rahner inasmuch and insofar as he provides for us the definitive expression or revelation of the love of God and of the human response to that love in the incarnation, but Christ is neither so central that the whole of God's loving disposition toward us is encapsulated in him, nor so central that the question of our own response to the love of God becomes effectively peripheral to the theological task'. "Karl Rahner, the Trinity," 148.

⁵⁶² 'We should observe, however, that, while she is affirmative of the christological traditions of Nicea and Chalcedon, Johnson does not feel it is necessary to utilize substance ontology. She explicitly affirms the *homoousios* ... [but] finds it more helpful to speak of the "two natures" in terms of relationality. Unfortunately, her development of the two natures is very brief'. Harold Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism," 337.

⁵⁶³ "Jesus Christ in the Catechism," *America* 162 (1990): 222.

supports a Christology 'from above' that 'starts in heaven with the pre-existent Son of God, traces His descent into the world of human history in order to die for our sins, and ends with His universal reign again in glory ... This becomes the primary filter through which His story is told and His significance perceived'.⁵⁶⁴

The problem is that the Catechism interprets Scripture in line with Nicene Christology and uses Scripture (particularly Jesus' own words) to prove his divinity, thus supporting 'one particular dogmatic view of Jesus Christ, filtering out whatever does not support this view and pressing biblical insight into a neo-scholastic mold'.⁵⁶⁵ By not taking into account modern biblical criticism, interpretation and twentieth-century experience Jesus' divinity is 'over-emphasised', and Chalcedon once again gives way to Nestorianism and Docetism.⁵⁶⁶

Johnson considers her Christology to follow Rahner's 'corrective' against this 'trend'.⁵⁶⁷ She starts with anthropology and the belief that transcendental experience is experience of the divine (the union of grace and nature). In so doing, she starts with a different concept of salvation and so a different concept of Jesus. First, people discover

⁵⁶⁴ "Jesus Christ in the Catechism," 206.

⁵⁶⁵ "Jesus Christ in the Catechism," 208, 222. 'In the interest of its own agenda, [the official Catechism] does violence to the Gospel's Christological variety and presents a false uniformity as historical fact... Scripture texts are strung together in an indiscriminate manner with little regard for their own integrity; e.g., Matthew, Galatians, Acts of the Apostles, John and 1 Thessalonians are cited as a package to confirm that Jesus is the Son of God in a divine, transcendent sense.... Scripture is pressed onto a procrustean bed. It is as though the biblical renewal had never happened'.

⁵⁶⁶ "Jesus Christ in the Catechism," 207.

⁵⁶⁷ Thomas Weinandy classifies Johnson with other theologians following the trend in contemporary Christology to 'rescue' Jesus from the Chalcedonian threat to his humanity, thereby embracing a form of adoptionism. Jesus' relationship with God differs in degree from our own but not in kind. The 'human Jesus uniquely embodies or incarnates some aspect of God's immanent presence in the world, such as the spirit of love or the word of truth' or wisdom. Through his liberating message 'and his selfless, redemptive suffering and death, he manifests his loyal and obedient sonship, and so demonstrates God's inner stance of love on behalf of humankind'. The Trinity, by necessity, 'vanishes'. *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 114n5, 114-15. We are led to ask why adoptionists assume Jesus to be God's 'envoy' and not some other human being in some other time and place?

and participate in their own 'salvation experiences'. Second, while Jesus' salvation experience is both historically meaningful and universally symbolic, for '[a]ll the secondary and derivative interpretations which Christians have used to explain the salvific significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus (sacrifice, the pouring out of blood, etc.) the original experience of this salvific significance is simply this: "We are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God, and God has thereby made the divine salvific will present in the world historically, really and irrevocably."⁵⁶⁸

The need to posit a divine 'nature', thus making Jesus Christ the universal mediator between God and humanity, is unnecessary since *the concept of atonement* is no longer 'viable'.⁵⁶⁹ New conclusions are drawn: 'Historical studies make three things clear about the genesis of Christian belief in Jesus and salvation: its origin lies in lived experience; the language used to interpret the experience is narrative and metaphoric; and diversity of historical contexts leads to a plurality of interpretations'.⁵⁷⁰

To reduce Christ to the historical individual of Jesus of Nazareth 'falls short and twists the central testimony of biblical and doctrinal traditions'. Moreover, 'the whole Christ is a corporate personality, a relational reality, redeemed humanity that finds its way by the light of the historical narrative of Jesus' compassionate, liberating love'.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ Rahner, *Foundations*, 284, cited by Johnson, "Mary and Contemporary Christology," 167.

⁵⁶⁹ A 'seriously flawed' aspect of the Catechism is its satisfaction theory of atonement which (1) casts God the Father 'in the vengeful role of the executioner', (2) places an emphasis on the individual person's salvation from sin, and (3) has a 'peculiar, relentless emphasis on submissiveness': '[Jesus'] ministry is held up as an example of humility, while His death on the cross is the supreme instance of his submission to the will of His Father. This is what won salvation, and believers are pointed to these examples as the model for their own behavior, generically'. 'Such a picture', states Johnson, 'is simply not true to the Jesus of the Gospels'. The salvation that Jesus brings 'occasions liberation, not a new submission'. "Catechism," 221-22.

⁵⁷⁰ "Jesus and Salvation," 3. The historical Jesus is only present with us as a memory of solidarity (no eternal Son and new Adam). Nevertheless, the 'metahistorical Christ or cosmic Christ' is universally present and active in human history and can even be thought of as 'cosmic Wisdom' or 'Creator Spirit'!

⁵⁷¹ "The Maleness of Christ," 112.

Thus, if we *cannot* say that the Christ is more than Jesus, then we *deny the witness of the New Testament*. Ultimately, Johnson believes that

it becomes possible to affirm that all mediations of the Spirit in the world do not necessarily lead to belief in Jesus Christ. For the concrete Jesus of history is uncreated Wisdom in kenotic form, enfleshed within the contingency of history ... *even when the Chalcedonian confession is affirmed in all its fullness*, the contingent, historical character of the Jesus event allows for the possibility that the divine offer of salvation finds different concrete form [sic] in other contingent contexts...To concentrate on Jesus alone in a kind of Christomonism has led historically to many dead ends for understanding as well as to imperialist action toward those who do not believe in Christ ... But as history goes on after the historical Jesus, salvation is primarily a pneumatological phenomenon. It is Spirit-Sophia-Shekinah who provides the connection between the historical Jesus and the present community, and who empowers the present experience of salvation.⁵⁷²

Here Johnson highlights the importance, indeed the necessity, of human action in salvation. 'What is first of all God's gift *is ultimately a human task*. Even in matters of salvation, God's grace and human initiative do not compete but grow in direct proportion.... [Human acts make persons] *co-partners with God in the coming of salvation*'.⁵⁷³

In this lengthy but important quote, Johnson summarises her Christological approach:

[A]n appropriate christology *begins* with an analysis of the human condition, including the suffering of women under multiple oppressions; *proceeds* by telling the story of Jesus and his disciples in his own time and place (hence the importance I see in Jesus research); *then* traces the plurality of interpretations generated by first century communities in view of their experience of salvation; and *from there* unpacks their theological interpretations of who Jesus is in relation to themselves and God. *Experience of salvation comes first; metaphysics arrives second*. The encounter with a gracious God in Jesus happens first; the idea that Jesus the Christ is the incarnate Logos arises – chronologically and epistemologically – second. This genetic approach inevitably structures christological thinking in a pattern 'from below,' which then partners today's hermeneutical efforts to release the spiritual, theological, and liberating meanings of Jesus the Christ for contemporary communities.

In a word, *I affirm ascending christology as the abiding basis and necessary criterion for descending christology, which in turn has a secondary and interpretive character*. Having cleared this, I also think, however that once this pattern from below has been established

⁵⁷² "Jesus and Salvation" 17, 10 (emphasis added). Johnson exploits Rahner's understanding of holy mystery by grounding it not in the economic Trinity but in 'threefold' 'salvation' experience. Whatever this means to Johnson, Molnar is right to argue that it is misguided to suggest that the original basis for Christian theology is the experience of being saved. Even in its most Biblical sense, '[a]ny genuine experience of salvation would necessarily point away from itself to its true basis in God's action *ad extra*, that is, an action of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in light of which our experience makes sense'. "Karl Barth and the Current Discussion," in *Divine Freedom*, 128-29n7.

⁵⁷³ "Jesus and Salvation," 13-14.

epistemologically, then christological language from above *is* permissible, so long as it takes place within the framework and all-pervasive structure of ascending christology. ...Christology from above points to the fact that God compassionately takes the saving initiative in the coming to be of Jesus; that Jesus exists in history as a divine gift; that his own personal identity is rooted in the mystery of divine being. These are important affirmations for the Christian community to make, even though they are not epistemologically first but rather drawn out by the logic of faith as implications of the event of Jesus. It seems to me that, if this is kept firmly in view, then once you have constructed the ladder from below and climbed up, you can run up and down in any direction with a clear conscience.⁵⁷⁴

Though Johnson may run up and down her 'christological ladder' with a 'clear conscience', she fails to recognise three important facts: (1) There are competing claims at each end of the ladder, (2) they represent mutually exclusive conditions for the recognition and affirmation of truth about Jesus Christ as intrinsic to the 'revelatory' event, and (3) neither set of claims can be extracted from their epistemic foundations and, as neutral ideas, be re-schematized without denying their veracity. Because she fails to recognise this, she also fails to recognise that Christology 'from above' considers its affirmations to be given by the Spirit of God and thus *precisely* to be 'epistemologically first'. This means that one cannot 'ascend' the ladder without severing the Church's confession of Jesus Christ from its ontological identity *in Christ* and also lose its continuity with Christian tradition as the dogmatic articulation of that confession.

Chalcedonian Implications

If one is inclined to think of Christology 'from above', this is only to say that a Christology grounded in the recognition of Christ as Immanuel will be a Christology in which the direction of the pressure of interpretation is 'from God' as that Reality. In the event of that presence *to* humanity as such, the Church makes the confessional affirmation that Jesus Christ is *homoousion*. (To think in terms of 'ascending' or 'descending' Christology is a rather crude approach.) The question is whether Johnson

⁵⁷⁴ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 105-6.

holds the Chalcedonian view of the *homoousion* seriously. Without this understanding, Johnson loses three critical aspects of Christian doctrine, each of which are vital to her own theological concerns: (1) supremely loving divine immanence that maintains the divine-human distinction with full integrity, (2) true salvation and thus full humanity, and (3) revelation of God as non-oppressive and wholly for his human creatures. However, we would also argue that these are aspects to which her relational ontology will not obtain.

a. Immanence with Integrity

Johnson's attempt to save Jesus' full humanity assumes that the integrity of the human person Jesus, 'possessing' a human 'I', is compromised when the identity of this human 'I' is the eternal Son of the Father, a divine subject (because the divine 'I' will dominate the human 'I'). But if the subject of the human 'I' is not the divine Son, then no incarnation has taken place. And yet Jesus' humanity cannot reveal his divinity, which is what is required in Johnson's 'realised anthropology'. Jesus differs from us in only degree, not in kind.⁵⁷⁵

As George Hunsinger puts it, Chalcedon speaks of two terms and one relationship. The terms are 'complete in deity' and 'complete in humanity'; their relationship is one of unity-in-distinction within one and the same *person*.⁵⁷⁶ These terms of 'deity' and 'humanity' are not understood in abstraction but only in the incomprehensible mystery and historical reality of Jesus Christ – Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God – attested to in the New Testament. In the unity of this one person, these two

⁵⁷⁵ As Molnar points out, 'Jesus' humanity as such does not reveal because he is veiled in his revelation and thus he causes offence. Revelation thus means the unveiling of what is by nature veiled and it is identical with the power of the resurrection. This means it must be understood as an *exception* and as a *miracle*'. See "Christology and the Trinity: Some Dogmatic Implications of Barth's Rejection of Ebionite and Docetic Christology," in *Divine Freedom*, 28-9.

⁵⁷⁶ "Karl Barth's Christology," in *Disruptive Grace* (see n. 474) 134-5.

natures find 'no distinction or separation', 'confusion or change', and yet both natures have their inviolable integrity.⁵⁷⁷ This cannot be understood according to a principle, as a conceptual scheme or cohesive system of thought. The only 'principle' is the freedom of God.⁵⁷⁸ "His being as this One is his history, and his history is this being."⁵⁷⁹

Without the Chalcedonian confession of Jesus' being 'complete in deity', there is no Christian confession of his being God's reconciling act of revelation in the world – of Emmanuel, God with us and for us – the mystery of God's act of supreme transcendence becoming wholly immanent. On the other hand, without the confession of his being 'complete in humanity' *precisely such that it is not commingled with his divinity*, Jesus is not an authentically free human in his own particular, historical uniqueness, whose life was lived out in radical obedience to God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' humanity is not different because it is (to use a misleading phrase) 'the incarnation of God', that is to say, the rendering or replication of what God is, scaled down conveniently to dimensions of our historical existence. ... Rather, what we have is the hypostatic presence of God among us humanly, and in such a way as to reconcile our fallen and estranged flesh to God, renewing and transforming the flesh until it corresponds in terms proper to its own 'nature' to who and what God is in his. ... it is the firstfruits of a new, redeemed humanity in correspondence with God. When God speaks his Word into the realm of flesh, we might say, it results not in an echo, but precisely in a reply, a response from the side of the creature to the Creator's call.⁵⁸⁰

Without holding to the distinction of both natures in their essential unity, divine and human distinction would become blurred at the point when humanity most needs Jesus' choices to be truly free and thus most truly human.

⁵⁷⁷ The two natures exhibit non-hierarchical asymmetry because they are not ordered according to a scale whereby they differ in degree only. They share no common measure or standard of measurement. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 286-7n1. See Barth, *C.D.* III.3, 104.

⁵⁷⁸ Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology," 138. This doctrine also enabled Barth to emphasise how it is possible for God genuinely to be known in the world without yet being of the world. It insists on the personal presence of God in a particular human life while differentiating the content of that life at every tangible point from God's own existence as God. Hart, "Revelation," 51.

⁵⁷⁹ *C.D.* II/1, 486; IV/1, 128. Though both natures were actual from Jesus' conception by the Spirit, Barth describes their union as never essentially static, but rather as 'a state of being in the process of becoming'. "Karl Barth's Christology," 141.

⁵⁸⁰ Hart, "Was God in Christ?" 22.

b. Salvation through the Person and Work of Christ

Salvation is dependent on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which inseparably involves both the work and person of Jesus Christ. The basic rule of any internally coherent Christology, argues Hunsinger, is that the person and work of Christ mutually imply each other. In other words, the work (*w*) presupposes the person (*p*) just as the person conditions the work (if *w*, then *p*; and if *p*, then *w*).⁵⁸¹ Not only in Christ are God and man united in this unique person (*hypostasis*), but the action of each is united in the historical, personal event of the Incarnation. 'He acts as God when he acts as a human being, and as a human being when he acts as God'.⁵⁸²

If the *work* of Christ is *materially decisive* for bringing about reconciliation with God toward whom we are hostile and condemned sinners, then the *person* of Christ is *logically indispensable* to this work: "If *w*, then *p*." A mere human being, 'no matter how fully actualized in no matter what transcendental way, could not accomplish this work.... Only a particular person who was at once truly God and yet also truly human could do a work of this kind. Both the person and the work are *exclusively unique*'.⁵⁸³

Change the value of either *w* or *p*, and the corresponding value of the other changes as well. In Johnson's Christology (a modification of what Hunsinger calls Rahner's 'middle Christology') the *work* of Christ has changed. As we have seen, 'sin' is more a matter of *bondage* than of guilt, so that what we are saved from is sin's *power*, not

⁵⁸¹ Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology," 131.

⁵⁸² *C.D.* IV/2, 115.

⁵⁸³ Hunsinger, "Baptized into Christ's Death," 264.

its penalty.⁵⁸⁴ Consequently, Christ's work is still considered materially decisive in that it effects our *re-empowerment*, but not our complete recreation.

Because our plight is one of *estrangement* from God [not enmity or condemnation], the solution is ... our being reunited with God *through an inner experience* of spiritual re-empowerment. The cross of Christ is significant, not because of vicarious expiatory suffering, but because it shows that Jesus fully took part in the *brokenness* of the human condition *without* forsaking his spiritual union with God. We are saved *not* so much by something fundamentally unique and *unrepeatable* that took place apart from us on our behalf as by a certain communion with Christ which allows *some measure* of his perfected spirituality and destiny to be *repeated* or *re-enacted* in our lives. We are saved by the effect in us for which the work apart from us functions as little more than the precondition for its possibility.⁵⁸⁵

Because the work is *extrinsic*, however, then the *p* that is entailed by this *w* is not Jesus Christ, the incarnate Savior (fully God, fully human). Rather, it is Jesus Christ, the divinely empowered human being who, like us, was 'saved by God' (the 'redeemed redeemer'). Although Johnson considers Jesus' person to be materially decisive, he is neither necessary nor logically indispensable. (Hunsinger notes that at least in principle it seems that any other sufficiently empowered human being might have or might yet accomplish much the same thing.) Again, the person of Christ required by Johnson's Christology '*is unique but not unique in kind*'.⁵⁸⁶ Thus we have what amounts to 'salvation by spiritual *repetition*: what took place spiritually in Christ is what now takes place spiritually in us, i.e. the same *sort* of thing is to be repeated, regardless of all differences in degree.... Consequently, at the consummation of all things it would seem that the Savior will be little more than the first among equals'.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁴ Thus the easy correspondence in feminist theology to sin as oppressive *power* inherent in sexist structures and freedom or 'salvation' as liberation from *bondage* and 'conversion' into selfhood or full (arguably autonomous) humanity.

⁵⁸⁵ Hunsinger, "Baptized into Christ's Death," 264-5.

⁵⁸⁶ "Baptized into Christ's Death," 265.

⁵⁸⁷ "Baptized into Christ's Death," 265-6.

Losing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and thus our human distinction, *koinonia* with Christ is essentially our participation in and appropriation of Christ's 'spirituality',⁵⁸⁸ regardless, says Hunsinger, of

whether it is called his God-consciousness, or the kingdom of God, or the new being, or authentic being-towards-death, or experiential religion, or the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, or womanspirit rising, or the rejection of violence, or the original blessing, or perhaps simply faith, or even faith informed by love. The list goes on and on, but the structure is always the same. What took place *extra nos* is no more than the condition for the possibility of what takes place *in nobis*. The *decisive locus of salvation* is not fixed in what took place in the cross of Christ there and then, but in what takes place in us or among us here and now. Salvation essentially encounters us as a *possibility* that is not actual for us *until* it is somehow actualized in our spiritual and social existence, and the *process* of actualization proceeds by degrees. Though primarily a divine gift, salvation is always *also* [even only] a human task.⁵⁸⁹

Christian soteriology, however, is a matter of human transformation/recreation and restored relation (divine-human, human-human, human-earth) and has a basic structure; it is inextricably *extra nos* - *pro nobis* - *in nobis*. The loss of any of these dimensions means losing the content of the gospel in terms of the initiative and divine gift of God's salvation in the person and work of Christ. God, who is *other* than us, is God *for* us in loving relation *with* us as Creator, Redeemer, Lord, brother, Father, Spirit, comforter, Priest, King. His work and love are not extrinsic to his own being or ours. Rather, his work *in us* of reconciliation, ontological reconstitution and *koinonia* is an eschatological reality in our present, historical existence.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁸ 'Even the immanence of the Son can be a threat, if it appears to endanger the otherness and freedom of the redeemed. If Christ *is*, without qualification, humankind or even the church, dangerous consequences for human autonomy threaten'. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 91.

⁵⁸⁹ "Baptized into Christ's Death," 266.

⁵⁹⁰ The *mode* of salvation is different in Roman Catholic and Reformed thought. Generally, in the Reformed tradition the decisive locus of salvation is the historical event of the cross, such that our *koinonia* with Christ is with the risen Lord who died necessarily *in our place*. Salvation on the cross was/is a *finished, perfected and completed work*. Nothing is added to it from our side, nor do its actuality and efficacy depend on our acceptance of it (hence they are *received as gift*). Catholicism generally speaks of salvation as a 'process' that continues to the end of time as the 'risen life of the *Savoir*' communicates itself to the life of the community of faith. Sinners are redeemed as they open themselves to grace, and with the 'help' of grace carry on and actualise the 'dispositions' of Christ. Redemption is thus not work of God in Christ alone. Reformed thought generally (and Barth particularly) considers this view not to take sin or grace seriously enough. Hunsinger, "Baptized into Christ's Death," 267- 269.

A Christology that fully affirms the *homoousion* also affirms that we are constituted as sinful humanity against God apart from Christ, and that we are reconstituted as new humanity by the death and resurrection of Christ. Otherwise, the person and the work that correspond with the term 'divine incarnation' are meaningless.

c. God the Self-Giving Servant

Johnson rightfully asserts that the possibility of love, freedom and life lived in communion with God and others 'all depends on the character of God'.⁵⁹¹ And yet, when she argues that the 'deepest core of reality is a mystery of personal connectedness that constitutes the very livingness of God',⁵⁹² we are left wondering what 'personal connectedness' she is referring to. Who loves and is being loved? Without a Christology that reveals God incarnate in Jesus Christ, and through him the Father and the Spirit, Johnson can only 'hope' and 'trust' that it really is God that she encounters in her own experience. 'At rock bottom [Trinitarian symbolic description] is the language of hope. No one has ever seen God, but thanks to the experience unleashed through Jesus in the Spirit we hope, walking by faith not by sight, that the livingness of God is with us and for us as renewing, liberating love'.⁵⁹³

In the Christian confession of the *homoousion*, however, the Son and the Father are One. When we see Jesus, we see the character of God revealed. 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father ...The words I say are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me...' (Jn 14:9b-11a). And what does the Father look like? Jesus tells

⁵⁹¹ Johnson, "The Search for the Living God," 8; *Friends of God*, 20; "Between the Times," 22, 27.

⁵⁹² *SWI*, 238, 226.

⁵⁹³ *SWI*, 200-201.

of the lavish character of the Father in various parables, the most notable being the father of the lost and found, and embittered older, sons (Lk 15:31).

The Scripture also bears witness that Jesus Christ, precisely as *homoousion*, 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness' (Phil 2:6-7). The particular 'human likeness' of this man – who *is* the true image of God – is cruciform (Phil 2:8). God, who gives himself for us in the Son, takes the form of a servant to affect our reconciliation, to be one with us in our suffering, to take condemnation upon himself for our freedom and death for our life. He continues to be with us and for us, serving as our High Priest, our permanent, universal means of access to the Father making intercession for us, baptising us in the Holy Spirit to join us to the fellowship he shares with the Father. The Father is the one who gives the Spirit of adoption to make us his children, joining us to himself, making us co-heirs with his Son (Rom 8:14-17). 'Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family, so Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters' (Heb 2:11).

This is not dominating oppression from a God who exists in solitary isolation. This is the Triune God who has come 'immanently' (or 'Immanuel-ly') present among us *as God* in Jesus Christ. *Unless* we confess that Jesus is *homoousion*, however, divine and human, we cannot know divine immanence as non-oppressively, freely for us. 'As kenosis', states Colin Gunton, 'the condescension of the Son to the human condition is a form of non-coercive yet redemptive and immanent divine action. It is, we might say, not a threatening immanence, as all *general* forms of divine immanence are, but a personal one, and of a particular kind. That is to say, it is a form of immanence – *kenotic*

immanence – which both respects the otherness of the fallen world and reshapes it in a redemptive form of relation to God'.⁵⁹⁴

Only when (and then every time) divine freedom is abstracted from this reality, can it be construed as oppressive. It means, says Barth, that we have suddenly moved outside reality and are dealing with concepts limited by our own human fallenness. In this unreality some 'other god' is at work than the God who loves in Jesus Christ and some 'other creatures' than those loved by God in Christ.⁵⁹⁵ When these unreal concepts are tied to ideologies or anthropologies that consider freedom to be the primary domain and exercise of the creature, even as the human agent for good and transformation, danger lurks, for they inevitably become tied to concepts of power totally foreign to the cruciform power of God revealed in the suffering and exalted Son.

Just as the being of God is not known in conceptual abstraction, neither is his freedom known in abstraction from his choice to be God for us as Father, Son and Spirit, revealed in Jesus Christ. To deny God in this revelation is to deny his Being-Act, to deny his freedom to exist and reveal without condition. It is also to deny humanity its identity and freedom, for in Christ is humanity's Word of freedom as well. 'Where else', Barth asks, 'can we learn that freedom exists and what it is except in confrontation with God's own freedom as offered to us as the source and measure of all freedom?'⁵⁹⁶

Adoptionism and Docetism

Barth emphasises that while it is and always remains God, the Father of Jesus Christ who is the unique object that determines our thinking about God, and who comes

⁵⁹⁴ Christ and Creation, 91-2.

⁵⁹⁵ C.D. III/3, 114-120.

⁵⁹⁶ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, (John Knox, 1960), 100.

as God to meet us *in our experiences* in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, he does so, however, without becoming identical with or dependent upon those experiences. This means that thinking about Jesus cannot begin with our ideas or our experiences, which would lead to what Barth called, respectively, Docetic and Ebionite (adoptionist) Christology. 'In both instances', observes Molnar, 'confession of Jesus' deity would be no more and no less than confession of the power of human ideas or the power of human experience. Such starting points therefore would necessarily deny the content of Christian confession at the outset. They would deny the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, independently of what we may think and independently of our experiences, beliefs or feelings'.⁵⁹⁷

Johnson believes that she escapes a Docetic interpretation of Jesus. Docetic or Ebionite tendencies, however, are embedded in her 'ascending Christology', not least because she so closely follows Rahner's Christology. On the one hand, Rahner suggests that the incarnation is the result of the human achievement of ultimate self-transcendence. This view of 'the apotheosis of a man' is almost classically Ebionite. On the other hand, he seems to conclude that Jesus is the highest instance of anthropological achievement. This view is almost classically Docetic. In other words, it is the *idea* of God as the mysterious nameless incomprehensible Whole that determines Rahner's thought about Jesus.⁵⁹⁸

Johnson could not be clearer in her own approach. As she ascends her 'christological ladder' she begins with experience, present and then past (including that

⁵⁹⁷ "Christology and the Trinity," 27-8.

⁵⁹⁸ Molnar, "Christology and the Trinity," 52. Torrance also critiques Rahner's docetic interpretation of the humanity of Jesus that severs him from identification with the immanent and economic Trinities. *Persons in Communion*, 276-77.

of the 'historical Jesus' and the interpreting communities that succeeded him). Next comes 'the idea' that Jesus is the Christ, both 'chronologically and epistemologically'. But Molnar disagrees. 'Jesus' uniqueness is in no way dependent upon the community's recognition of him to be true and valid. And because this is so, there can be no confusion of Christ and Christians and no suggestion of adoptionism or subordinationism in Christology or in Trinitarian reflection. Any such suggestion once more implies the reversal of divine and human being and action and thus the collapse of theology into anthropology'.⁵⁹⁹ Nor is Jesus to be abstracted from the 'idea' of the Christ which is then confused with the Church, the Spirit or the relationality of being. Ultimately, he argues, this confusion in contemporary Christology cannot but lead to a failure to distinguish the immanent and economic Trinity, as we have seen.

Concluding Comments

We began this critique by reflecting on the fact that Trinitarian theology is in fact 'discourse' about God based on God's incarnate and Spirit-given 'discourse' concerning himself as One God in three persons. To that end, in concluding this critique and in prefacing the critique of the next chapter, we consider Johnson's 'trinitarian discourse' to fail to enter into the Church's discourse as *reflection* upon God as both the Subject and Self-giving Object of theological inquiry. Such discourse assumes that God has revealed Godself in his Word, Jesus Christ, in testimony of Scripture and in the confessional witness of the Church as it stands in the tradition of its creeds. Instead, Johnson constructs a way of talking about her ideal *concept* of God from a feminist ethic of

⁵⁹⁹ "Christology and the Trinity," 28-9.

gender and power and uses her symbol to promote that ideal while abstracting language from the tradition without its meaning, thereby 'privatising' her discourse.

Christian theology, if it is done at all, is done only in obedient response to God's gracious Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Thus, Barth argues, every independent attempt by humans to know or speak about God is futile and doomed to failure. However sincere it may or may not be, its fruit, as Feuerbach rightly saw, is essentially idolatrous. It is merely projection of human needs and desires onto the clouds. Its failure is the failure to address itself to the proper place; the place where God has made himself known, and continues to make himself known. As Trinitarian revelation, the truth that Christian theology refers us to, the arguments and language it uses, are all radically contextual. It is the language of faith, which, as ontological participation in the inner life of God, is precisely a relation that grants 'conviction of things not seen'. The Christian theologian can neither anticipate a straightforward endorsement or recognition of these truths by the intellectual community at large nor hope to make them palatable in the form of *vestigia trinitatis*. Only those who are given to indwell the same ecclesial framework of meaning will make any real sense of Christian Trinitarian discourse – those joined to the Body of Christ who 'see' and 'hear' through participation in the vicarious life of the Son by the Spirit in praise of and prayer to the Father.⁶⁰⁰

Three-ness, unity, persons, *perichoresis*, *koinonia*, *homoousion* – all these linguistic concepts are interpreted out of the Triune revelation itself. Revelation 'commandeers' or 'reconciles' the language of the Church such that its terms acquire specific and concrete meaning for that community. To start other than with God's Triune being, e.g., with relational analogies from experience, suggests that the creature has both

⁶⁰⁰ I am indebted to Hart's "Barth, the Trinity and Pluralism" for his discussion here.

the capacity to and the warrant and criteria for speaking about God separate from the gospel. To endorse thinking about God this way is 'to risk admitting into the theological Ilium a Trojan horse "in whose belly – we can hear a threatening clank"! (CD I/1, p. 336)'.⁶⁰¹

⁶⁰¹ Torrance, "The Trinity," 80. 'It might be added', notes Torrance, 'that recent attempts to counterbalance the Augustinian *vestigia* with communitarian *vestigia* risk bequeathing to future generations a whole new series of problems'.

Chapter Four:

'Relational' God-Talk?

In expressing what is intended to be an integrated relational ontology, Johnson makes the following statement about her panentheistic, 'Trinitarian' theology:

In *She Who Is* I draw on themes and ideas from Thomas Aquinas to explore a feminist theology of God. ...I also make ontological claims and draw references about *the way things truly are*, but these are not beholden to any complete metaphysical system. ... With regard to the Trinity I play with multiple models, convinced that pushing only one alone inevitably leads to univocity in speech about the divine.⁶⁰²

This chapter examines whether Johnson's God-talk is safeguarded from univocity, as she intends. It simultaneously questions whether she is kept from the potential equivocity that threatens her agnostic approach. We will analyse whether her theological speech is truly 'analogical' – hence, 'relational' – Trinitarian discourse.

I. ***Agnostically Naming the 'Nameless'***

A. Proceeding 'Analogically' Under the Sign of Not-Knowing

Assessing Johnson's *Via Analogia*

As Johnson has stated above, her panentheistic theology and corresponding God-talk draw from a variety of sources and 'are not beholden to any complete metaphysical system'. She uses 'multiple models' – metaphors, images, analogies and concepts – to construct her symbol of Sophia-God, drawing from women's experience and making, as she says, 'ontological claims and drawing references about the way things really are' in terms of divine reality as 'relationality'.

I hold vigorously to the idea that theological language always and everywhere proceeds by way of analogy – or metaphor or symbol – and this undergirds my use of Sophia. The term *does not refer*

⁶⁰² "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 100-1 (emphasis added).

to an ontologically distinct object, but to the mystery of the transcendent God immanently present in the world ...though this can be spoken of in personalized terms.⁶⁰³

It is precisely at this point that Johnson turns to her Catholic tradition to defend her theological language. She argues that her transcendental approach employs the three-fold 'doctrinal' pattern of the Thomistic tradition – divine incomprehensibility (as agnostic unknowability), 'analogy', and a plurality of names – and thereby reawakens the 'freedom' and 'necessary open-endedness' of theological speech inherent in the tradition.⁶⁰⁴ In other words, she defends her Trinitarian symbol through the *via analogia*.

In review, the basic presupposition of Aquinas' *via analogia* is that creatures may speak of God – who transcends their experience – *from* their experience because of their participation in God's being. This is based on the analogous relation of creaturely effects to their primary Cause – the *analogia entis*.⁶⁰⁵ To speak of God from this relation assumes that creatures share secondarily but nonetheless *intrinsically* in the divine perfections, which belong primarily, intrinsically, and perfectly to God.⁶⁰⁶ It also assumes that it is

⁶⁰³ *SWI*, 110 (emphasis added). Roger Haight compares Johnson's use of personification in contrast to 'hypostatization': 'Personification is a figure of speech and a common literary figure ... Hypostatization ... or reification, is the *making into a real thing* an idea, or a concept, or an abstraction, or the object of a figure of speech, such as a personification. A personification becomes a hypostatization when the object is not treated *as if* it were a person, but *as a* real personal entity. The transition occurs in the intention of the user of the language and not necessarily in the language itself. In other words, it may sometimes be very difficult to know whether a personification or an hypostatization is in play'. Haight, "Jesus Christ in the Work of Elizabeth A. Johnson," *Things New and Old* (see n. 2) 53-54. Johnson argues that this really doesn't matter. 'The need [for the Wisdom symbol needs the chance to work in our imaginations and christological affirmations] ... is too strong to allow a concern for reification to stop it'. And yet, this is precisely her critique of classical theism, that 'the history of theology shows *how in practice theism has reified God*' thus making the 'concept' of infinite mystery *into a real thing*. *SWI*, 20.

⁶⁰⁴ From Rahner, Johnson states, 'The present ferment about naming, imaging, and conceptualizing God from perspectives of women's experience repristinates the truth that the idea of God, incomprehensible mystery, implies an open-ended history of understanding that is not finished'. *SWI*, 7. Martin notes: 'I doubt whether Rahner would acknowledge the conclusions at which Johnson arrives from [his] principles ... though he must take some responsibility for them'. *TFQ*, 181.

⁶⁰⁵ Trevor Hart cites this metaphysical principle as first aired by Proclus: 'Everything which by its existence bestows a character on others, itself primitively possesses that character, which it communicates to the recipient'. "Speaking of God's Love: Analogy, Reference and Revelation," in *Regarding Karl Barth* (see n. 235) 187.

⁶⁰⁶ Besides Aquinas's treatment on analogy in *ST I*, q. 12-13, Johnson refers to David Burrell's Thomistic interpretation in *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), and

within human capacity to discover what perfections necessarily belong to God and which do not. In other words, as a metaphysical 'principle', the *analogia entis* serves to function as a foundation for knowledge about God and his relation to the world *from* the natural world apart from the context of God's revelation in the event of the Incarnation.

As we have seen, Johnson uses this principle as the metaphysical foundation for her relational ontology. She does not, however (as she states above), adhere to the system as a whole. As was set forth in chapter two, one of Johnson's fundamental methodological and epistemological adjustments is to equate 'divine 'incomprehensibility' with Neo-Kantian 'unknowability' and experience of the 'Nameless'. She not only disregards the distinction between them that prevents the fall into agnosticism; she reinterprets Aquinas and the tradition to argue for *precisely that*: 'Ultimately, the highest human knowledge about God is to know that we do not know, a negative but entirely valid knowing ... The triune God is not simply unknown, but positively known to be unknown and unknowable – which is a dear and profound kind of knowledge'.⁶⁰⁷

In her interpretation, analogy and agnosticism go hand in hand. Analogy safeguards 'divine mystery' and 'otherness' through its moment of negation, reminding us that God is ultimately unknowable. Revelation, no matter by what model it is

Nicholas Lash's explanation of the positive value of negative knowing in analogy in "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy," in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 68-94.

⁶⁰⁷ *SWI*, 110, 205. Alan Torrance challenges this kind of feminist claim. Why does God-talk *require* a 'silence' of agnosticism at this point in Christian history to 'lead us' to 'the Mystery who is God'? What, asks Torrance, sets the controls for such an approach? Who or what creates, and breaks, the silence in the divine-human relation? Who 'leads' and when is it determined that the destination 'Mystery' is arrived at? 'On what basis are we entitled to believe that there is a God who will speak through this silence and thus bring us to *theological* resolution at all? Is this something we know in advance – and if so, on what grounds?' "Theology and Political Correctness," in *Harmful Religion: An Exploration of Religious Abuse*, ed. L. Osborn and A. Walker (London: SPCK, 1997), 101-121, 113.

'interpreted', does not and cannot dissolve unknowable mystery – 'God remains wholly other, blessedly present but conceptually inapprehensible, and so God' even when speaking 'analogically' from one's experience.⁶⁰⁸ By making this affirmation, Johnson contends that God's essential unlikeness to the finite world remains complete.⁶⁰⁹ She also uses this affirmation to distinguish her panentheistic position from pantheism and from process theology. Though process thought has 'fertilized' her thinking, it does not 'sufficiently honor the difference between God and the world'. Why? Specifically because 'it does not radically employ *the negative moment in analogy*'.⁶¹⁰

Thus, while Johnson affirms the threefold, analogical motion of affirmation, negation, and supereminence, analogy still needs 'a strong shot of the negative'. She (along with Catholic theologians Rahner, Erich Przywara and David Tracy)⁶¹¹ argues that *every* God-concept and symbol must go through this 'purifying double negation, negating the positive and then negating the negation, to assure its own legitimacy'.⁶¹² Analogy breaks open the *concept* of God 'in the affirming movement of the human spirit that passes from light into darkness and thence into brighter darkness'.⁶¹³ The double moment

⁶⁰⁸ *SWI*, 105.

⁶⁰⁹ "The Theological Case for God-She," 10; "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 441; *SWI*, 104-112, and *passim*. Again, with Rahner, Johnson's arguments for *ontological* distinction are predominantly *noetic* and *epistemic* rather than strictly *ontic*.

⁶¹⁰ "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 102 (emphasis added). She is speaking directly of Joseph Bracken's engagement with her thought in *SWI*.

⁶¹¹ *SWI*, 105, 115-116. Johnson argues that they have instigated a recovery of the 'complexity of analogy' by stressing its negating moment or 'its movement through negation toward mystery'. Torrance, however, sees it as an open question 'as to whether analogy, as interpreted by Przywara, is really representative of Catholic orthodoxy ... [and] is as central to Catholicism and Catholic theology as he suggests Karl Rahner seems nervous about the degree of prominence that it came to acquire – something for which he blames Przywara'. *Persons in Communion*, 123n6.

⁶¹² *SWI*, 113.

⁶¹³ *SWI*, 115. Robert Jenson rejects this kind of 'apophatic' permission-giving. He offers Luther's comment that faith perceives God who is 'hidden' in our hearts more as a 'darkness' like that over Sinai than a 'light' as a way of warding off what he considers to be the 'bowdlerized apophaticism' popular with approaches like that of Catholic reformism. 'That God is unknowable must not be construed to mean that he is but vaguely glimpsed through clouds of metaphysical distance, so that we are compelled – and at liberty – to

of negation moves it even farther: 'it does not shut down thought but corrects the inadequacy of the positive affirmation, compels it to transcend itself, pushes it to its term: God who is always ever greater. The negation does not deny or revoke the affirmation, leading to an agnostic void, but powerfully invalidates its limits, in the end giving off some light'.⁶¹⁴ Thus, it is in *the negating* moment that we 'intuit' what we do not know (cannot apprehend?) through the self-affirmation of our 'spirit' which participates in the Spirit of divine relationality – 'rightly' named by Johnson as Sophia-God.⁶¹⁵ (Or is it only women who intuit this accurately?)

Certain of Johnson's Catholic colleagues disagree with her agnostic interpretation of Aquinas, however. Francis Martin defends Thomistic consideration of analogy as properly taking place at the level of epistemic discourse – and that this is the discourse of the Church based on God's revelation in which we ontologically participate. Therefore, it is 'a systematic reflection on the validity of what is *already known*'; it is *not* an effort to establish the *a priori* conditions for agnostically naming the Nameless based on the experiencing subject as source and norm.⁶¹⁶

devise namings and metaphors guided by our religious need. It means on the contrary that we are stuck with the names and descriptions the biblical narrative contingently enforces, which seem designed always to offend somebody; it means that their *syntax* is hidden from us, so that we cannot identify synonyms or make translations. It means that we have no standpoint from which to relativize them and project more soothing visions'. "The Hidden and Triune God," *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol 2 (March 2000), 6-7.

⁶¹⁴ *SWI*, 115. Johnson views analogical language here to be akin to Judaism's reverential abstinence from the use of God's name. 'YHWH is a limit expression, not a defining name but an unnameable one....We are left in salutary darkness' (241). Here she seems to ignore YHWH's own 'character description' given to Moses in Exodus 34 that echoes throughout the Old Testament.

⁶¹⁵ In Fergus Kerr's negative assessment of Rahner's explication of human experience as the jumping off point into 'unknowable mystery', he states: 'In other words: we are drawn out beyond wherever we actually are by that which enables us to see what is what in our world but eludes our sight all the time that it does so. Some philosophers might be inclined to say that, if you are going to talk in this sort of way at all, then this must surely be *language*. Rahner, however, thinks that it is *God*'. "Rahner Retrospective," 371.

⁶¹⁶ *TFQ*, 224, (emphasis added). Martin cites Colman O'Neil ("Analogy, Dialectic and Inter-Confessional Theology," *The Thomist* 47 [1983]: 43-65), who states that analogy "has to do with the linguistic expression of a knowledge about God that is held, whether rightly or wrongly, to be *already* acquired and to be *true*, even though necessarily imperfect ... All that the theory of analogy is meant to do is to account

[O]ur predecessors [the believing community of the Church] had no doubt at all that they possessed knowledge about God, that they knew God, and that they understood his plan revealed in Jesus Christ. They were equally clear that God is incomprehensible, that he is the one "who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16).... The theory of analogical predication is precisely an attempt to validate the two extreme tenets of faith-knowledge, namely that there is genuine knowledge of God [given by the Holy Spirit], and that God is radically beyond all knowing.⁶¹⁷

Catherine LaCugna has also emphasised that apophasis and analogy are based on what we *do* know and can say about God. God is 'wholly other' but as such is nevertheless the self-revealing God of Jesus Christ and the Spirit. Our theological concepts, systems, and language must correspond to the fact that (indirectly) we *do* know God by means of God's being manifest in the works of creation and in personal self-revelation.⁶¹⁸ Janet Soskice also argues that Aquinas' theory is 'logico-linguistic' as well as metaphysical, and is more concerned with 'determining how we can *speak* of God than with devising crude ontological linkings between finite creatures and infinite Deity'.⁶¹⁹

Aquinas himself declares that 'there is no sound theology if the negative and positive are not used together. The positive way alone leads to anthropomorphism, to idolatry, to blasphemy. The negative way alone leads to agnosticism and atheism'.⁶²⁰

for the oddities of linguistic expression which result from this conviction (232).'" Martin argues that while analogy involves judgment, it is a judgment of objective and 'appropriate' correspondence rather than one of interior subjectivity. Here analogy differs from metaphor: 'Analogy always includes a judgment concerning this objective correspondence. Metaphor, on the other hand, while it expresses a perceived similarity, is directed more to creating the correspondence than to asserting the multiple possession of the reality so imputed. Failure to make this distinction is the source of some of the greatest confusion in the talk about metaphorical theology. ... When what is intuited or disclosed is based on an objective correspondence, there can be that judgment of something shared which is the heart of analogy'. Martin notes that while Janet Martin Soskice and Richard Swinburne would agree, they would not accent the role of 'judgment of objective correspondence' as he does.

⁶¹⁷ 'To approach this witness with an a priori need for an epistemic foundation and thus to interpret this witness to mean that these people were speaking not of God, but merely of their subjective experience, is to reveal our present ignorance, not theirs'. *TFQ*, 224-25.

⁶¹⁸ *God For Us*, 332.

⁶¹⁹ *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 65.

⁶²⁰ Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy* (see n.220) 98-99. Not presuming to present a full view of current Thomistic discourse, we are following Mondin's reinterpretation of Aquinas's *via analogia*. In brief, Mondin reintroduces Suárez' interpretation of the category of 'intrinsic attribution', a direct challenge to Cajetan's traditional interpretation and that of his contemporary exponent, Gerald Phelan. See, e.g., *Saint Thomas and Analogy*, The Aquinas Lecture (Milwaukee: 1941). Torrance presents a concise engagement

While Johnson would argue that she holds the positive and negative together, the moment of 'supereminence' is one of double negation in her thought, rather than a qualified restatement of what (arguably) we *can* say. This leads her, by her own acknowledgement, into an agnostic position – which she in turn wants to attribute to Aquinas.⁶²¹ Hence, in her attempt to preserve God's transcendence, her theology runs the risk of degenerating into 'wild and empty conceptual acrobatics'⁶²² and collapsing into equivocal meaninglessness.

What keeps Johnson's 'naming the Nameless' from empty speculation, with no epistemic access to God's being, despite her transcendental, ontological claims to the contrary? From her perspective, it is attentiveness to God-talk's basic 'rootedness in experience'.⁶²³ The counter-balance to God's unknowability is the ontological assumption that *experience* of self is the *experience* of God. Language has an 'analogous' nature, as do human beings: 'The "knowing" of God accomplished in the analogical process is a dynamic of relational knowing.... We *exist* analogously, in and through being grounded in holy mystery which always surpasses us'.⁶²⁴ This leads Johnson to conclude that (1) 'all speech about God is analogical',⁶²⁵ (2) that analogy 'shapes every category of words used to speak about God', be it 'metaphoric', 'relational', 'negative' or formally

with Mondin's thought as well as critiquing the underlying assumptions of Mondin's position in *Persons in Communion*, 142-48, to which we are indebted.

⁶²¹ *SWI*, 109.

⁶²² *SWI*, 198.

⁶²³ *SWI*, 198.

⁶²⁴ *SWI*, 114, 116.

⁶²⁵ Johnson acknowledges that there is no uniform agreement regarding the meaning or function of analogy among those Catholic theologians who still employ it. Her own ambiguity surfaces when she speaks of 'appreciating' Frederick Ferré's view that 'even though analogy *may not be* any longer *metaphysically credible*, it still remains *linguistically useful* for speech about God' (*SWI*, 117, 292n32, emphasis added). Neither is there unanimity regarding the 'symbol'. In fact, says Johnson, its range of meaning is so vast 'as to appear beyond profitable discussion', though its use may still disrupt 'the flow of logical positivism' and 'credit religious language with meaning'. Her use of metaphor supposedly aligns with McFague's. "The Right Way to Speak About God: Pannenberg on Analogy," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673; "The Symbolic Character," 320; "Forging Theology," (see n. 14) 110.

‘substantive’ (describing the divine perfections),⁶²⁶ and (3) that every category holds a degree of agnosticism: ‘Whether expressed by metaphorical, symbolic or analogical theology, there is basic agreement that the mystery of God is fundamentally unlike anything else we know of, and so is beyond the grasp of our naming’.⁶²⁷

This opens the way to speak of God using *any* and *all names* available from created reality without being tied to Biblical and doctrinal language.⁶²⁸ All names are not only legitimate but ‘religiously necessary’ because each provides a different perspective on ‘divine excellence’.⁶²⁹ In fact, God is ‘positively misrepresented’ if any one image (the One Name, Father, Son and Spirit) is thought to be *adequate*: ‘The bible and Christian tradition as well as the world’s religions give evidence of a revelry of symbols for the divine that nourish the mind and expand the spirit... a concrete term balances an abstract one, and so forth, each operating as a corrective to any other that would pretend to completeness’.⁶³⁰

The question is, are these conclusions in agreement with Aquinas? Does Johnson ‘draw on themes and ideas from Thomas Aquinas’ in support of her God-talk to the extent that she is free from univocity?

“Aquinas on Johnson”

a. Does Aquinas consider all God-talk to be analogical as Johnson claims?

Johnson believes that through ontological participation women can ‘analogically’, ‘metaphorically’ or ‘symbolically’ name God from any source as long as it reflects their

⁶²⁶ *SWI*, 114.

⁶²⁷ *SWI*, 116-117.

⁶²⁸ *SWI*, 108-109, 113-114.

⁶²⁹ *SWI*, 109. ‘All names’ technically includes patriarchal and abusive names, something she surely does not mean.

⁶³⁰ *SWI*, 118.

transcendental experience⁶³¹ As was discussed in chapter two, the principle at work in Johnson's thought is that of *efficient causality*. Effects (creatures) are 'like' their cause (God). This means that God can abstractly be called 'relationality', 'wisdom' or 'being', or be called 'mother' or 'friend' or any other name from human experience, and Johnson assumes there to be a kind of 'likeness'. (The safeguard is simultaneously to maintain God's essential *unlikeness* through negation.)

There is a problem with this general, broad-stroke approach, however. Not only are analogies different from metaphors or symbols (especially as defined by McFague or Tillich, as we shall see).⁶³² For Aquinas, there are also *different kinds of analogies*.⁶³³ More importantly, Aquinas considers only *one kind* of analogy to speak truthfully of God and creatures with any 'real' similarity. That is the analogy of 'intrinsic attribution'. And, even more specifically, it applies to only *one set of names* – the divine perfections.⁶³⁴ Thus, Thomistic analogy does not in fact allow that every category of words can be used

⁶³¹ *SWI*, 117.

⁶³² Johnson's indiscriminate use of analogy, symbol and metaphor forgets these to be distinct tropes with different functions in their contexts. She applies them randomly, synonymously and ultimately without recognising theological description as the language of ontological participation in the being of the Triune God who nevertheless remains ontologically distinct and has named himself in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Soskice calls this kind of indiscriminate definition and usage of terms a key 'defect' in current religious language. *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), x. Linda Woodhead concurs in "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 194.

⁶³³ According to Mondin, Aquinas considers there to be two general kinds of analogies that designate the relation of one thing to another. The first are analogies of *intrinsic denomination*, which include (a) the *analogy of intrinsic attribution* based on a relation of efficient causality between God, the primary analogate, and creatures, in whom God causes the property as secondary 'imperfect imitation'; and (b) the *analogy of intrinsic proportionality* based on a similarity of relations (e.g., 'the wisdom of God is to God as the wisdom of a human person is to the person', where wisdom is predicated of God and the person not because there is something similar in their natures with respect to wisdom, but because the relations Wisdom/God and wisdom/person are similar). There are also analogies of *extrinsic denomination*, which include (a) the *analogy of extrinsic attribution* according to proper signification (e.g., 'Peter is healthy' and 'food is healthy', where 'healthy' is a univocal concept but 'is' varies in meaning), and (b) the *analogy of (extrinsic) improper or metaphorical proportionality* (e.g., 'Achilles is a lion' and 'the beast is a lion', where Achilles 'acts like' a lion but the beast 'is' a lion, signifying the unqualified perfection of intrinsic, formal 'lioninity'). Names like 'mother' or 'friend' fall into this last category. *The Principle of Analogy*, 51-61.

⁶³⁴ A phrase originating with Suárez in describing Aquinas's approach. *The Principle of Analogy*, 34-35.

to speak *of God*. As Soskice reiterates, 'Aquinas restricts what can literally be said of God to a few, bare predicates – the so-called perfection terms'.⁶³⁵ Thus, Aquinas uses analogy in an attempt to preserve God's absolute, distinct transcendence while simultaneously expressing divine immanence in relation to creation.

In one sense, Aquinas considers all human talk of God to be analogical, insofar as it is neither univocal nor equivocal. He considers analogy – which relies on some sense of similarity as well as difference between God and creatures – to be the only way to speak of God that avoids anthropomorphism, provide real meaning *and* preserve God's transcendence. Aquinas assumes God's *a priori* reality at the heart of analogy. Thus, although "we come to a knowledge of God from other things, the *reality* in the names said of God and other things belongs by *priority in God* according to his mode of *being*, but the *meaning* of the name belongs to God by *posteriority*." Because creatures relate to God as effects to their cause, 'we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether he exists, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him'.⁶³⁶ In other words, by analogical predication, we name *perfections* which *belong properly* to God. Drawing our language from imperfect and fallen creatures, the *mode* of signification, however, will fall short. Thus, the thus names will be inadequate – but *only from our side*.⁶³⁷

Two universal principles are recognised to be at work in Aquinas's thought; first, that 'every agent acts in a way similar to itself' and second, correspondingly, that there is

⁶³⁵ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 65; See also "Can a Feminist Call God "Father"?" in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 81-94, 83.

⁶³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.12.12.

⁶³⁷ This differentiation between the *perfectio significata* and the *modus significandi* is crucial, says Trevor Hart, for it allows Aquinas to avoid appearing to subsume Creator and creatures under a common category of being. "Speaking of God's Love," 186.

a likeness between cause and effect (the principle of efficient causality). Only analogies ontologically grounded in efficient causality can meaningfully speak of both God and creatures – and *only* based on what Aquinas calls the analogy of *one to another*. The analogy of *one to another* is according to divine priority and creaturely posteriority.⁶³⁸ (Because the perfections belong *essentially*, intrinsically and perfectly to God, they can be predicated ‘truthfully’ of God using human speech. They are also ‘true’ of creatures by participation but only in a secondary, derivative and imperfect way.)⁶³⁹ The thing signified of God is perfect *not* because we’ve described it perfectly, but because it is essential to God and thus perfect *in God*.

Aquinas asserts that when applying a perfection like the term *good* to God and human beings, we must attend to three things; *what* is said of God and the human being (*res significata*, the goodness they both possess), *the meaning* of what is said (*ratio nominis*), and *the way* in which it is said (*modus significandi*, in this case a positive predication ‘goodness’).⁶⁴⁰ With respect to the perfection signified, God is the first or primary analogate; with respect to the *mode* of signification God is the secondary analogate. Names in their *mode of signification* apply primarily and properly to creatures

⁶³⁸ Aquinas makes this analogical distinction of *one to another*, says Mondin, out of ‘deep respect for God’s absoluteness and uniqueness’, but not, ironically, ‘at the expense of other beings’, i.e., not without real reference to the creature as well: ‘[T]heir safeguard cannot be a mode of predication which empties the name of its meaning when it is predicated of finite beings. This is the danger of extrinsic attribution, which in some respect is as pernicious as equivocity: it leads to agnosticism either with regard to creatures or with regard to God’. *The Principle of Analogy*, 34-35. We would argue that in Johnson’s case, it is the latter.

⁶³⁹ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 19-67.

⁶⁴⁰ Martin, *TFQ*, 227. Johnson seems not only to recognise the inadequacy of human speech as the *modus significandi*, but deems the *res significata* and the *ratio nominis* to be inadequate as well by abstracting them from their reference, hence opening them up for reconstruction and renaming. With no truth or objective reality in themselves, women supply meaning to the divine ‘names’ from their ‘burning agnosticism of experience’.

since 'we cannot understand the meaning of the name of any perfection without thinking of some particular mode of realization of the perfection in a creature'.⁶⁴¹

Thus, Aquinas contends that it is 'true' that God is 'good' and that human beings are 'good'. Grounded in efficient causality, the eminent meaning of this term derives from *God* and so speaks of something *intrinsic* (though utterly different) in God and creatures. In other words, it is true because *in God* it is ultimately, originally true.

To speak of God as 'mother' or 'friend', on the other hand, is to employ, ironically, what Aquinas calls a 'metaphorical' or 'symbolic' form of analogy. This kind of analogy applies 'truthfully' *only to creatures*.⁶⁴² Why? Because names like 'mother' are intrinsic to creatures since they are only realised finitely in creation. As such they are *extrinsic* to God.⁶⁴³ They derive 'from below' and thus are *not* based on efficient causality. Metaphorical or symbolic analogies only 'belong' to God in a *subjective, non-intrinsic* way and so cannot be 'true' of God *in se*. In short, to say that God is 'mother' or 'friend' is not 'true', according to Aquinas.

It is precisely the Creator-creature distinction that analogies of efficient causality try to preserve. It is precisely this distinction that metaphorical or symbolic analogies

⁶⁴¹ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 34, 95-96. Martin elaborates this point, stressing the truth content and objective reality of such analogical statements, in *TFQ*, 228.

⁶⁴² She asserts that *Maimonides'* concept of negation is a good way to think 'analogically' about all categories of words for God, not only metaphorical or relational but substantive terms (perfections) like 'God is good, living, wise; God is personal; God exists'. Clearly this assertion shows that Johnson does not ground true analogies in a real causal relation of one to another, nor does she choose the name *Sophia* because it is a proper perfection. From this standpoint, it seems any name will do based on her ontology of being. *SWI*, 114.

⁶⁴³ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 94. Aquinas calls these names of 'mixed perfections': '[T]here are in creatures certain perfections wherein they differ from God, and which the creature owes to *its being made from nothing* These are falsely ascribed to God: and whatsoever terms imply such like conditions cannot be ascribed to God otherwise than metaphorically, for instance, lion, stone and so on, inasmuch as matter is included in their definition' (*De Potentia*, 7, 5, ad 8, cited by Mondin, 22-23).

grounded in *creaturely reality* cannot uphold.⁶⁴⁴ Hence Aquinas argues that 'names' for God like 'mother' and 'friend' have no ontological ground for speaking *about God*. These extrinsic analogies, so common to feminist theology, are analogies of 'improper proportionality'. The irony is that in these kinds of analogies, there is *no ontological likeness of nature or relations* between creatures and God! (Analogies of improper proportionality are ontologically grounded in 'a likeness of action', not efficient causality.)⁶⁴⁵

Therefore, Johnson cannot argue *from Aquinas* that to speak of God using metaphorical or symbolic analogies is a credible interpretation of the *analogia entis* or the *via analogia*. Neither can she speak analogically of God in this manner and assume to uphold the distinction she understands to be necessary to the Christian faith.⁶⁴⁶ This leads her directly into the problem of univocity that she is concerned to avoid. She is speaking only from creaturely reality about creaturely reality, and not about God. On the one hand, her agnosticism prevents her from considering God to be the primary analogate of *only* the divine perfections, as her tradition maintains. On the other hand, her agnosticism prevents her from being able to say that *any* name is *inapplicable* from creaturely reality when applied to God. Surely this not only puts her outside her tradition but threatens to be 'univocity run rampant' with no controls and no ability to argue for 'the right way' to talk about God.

⁶⁴⁴ When speaking from creatures about something that originates in creatures, it is impossible to distinguish between the mode of signification (*always* creaturely) and the thing signified (in this case, also creaturely). This distinction is critical to true analogies that speak of both God and creatures. Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 93.

⁶⁴⁵ Mondin argues that the mind works much more arbitrarily in constructing extrinsic analogies of improper proportionality because there are *no definite rules* for deciding whether an analogy of improper proportionality is *legitimate*: 'It is then clear that the relation of action, which is the ontological ground of improper proportionality, is something *very vague and indefinite*' (*The Principle of Analogy*, 71-4, emphasis added).

⁶⁴⁶ See her statement to this effect in the Introduction.

b. What impact does Johnson's interpretation of the *analogia entis* have on her attempt to remain free from univocity?

Johnson relies on what is referred to as a 'proportional' interpretation of the *analogia entis*, rather than the principle of intrinsic attribution.⁶⁴⁷ In this approach, the *analogia entis* serves as a kind of unifying cosmological principle grounded in the universal participation of all things in 'being', according to their proportionate 'share'. This also serves as the basis for the diversity of each being: 'Their 'share' in being is *proportionate* to the 'being-ness' of each.'⁶⁴⁸

This concept of proportionality is applied analogically in speaking of God and the world. As such, the analogy of proportionality makes two important claims: First, the perfections *intrinsically* and *perfectly* exist in and hold analogously for *both* God and creatures, and second, they are *intrinsically* and analogously *proportionate in each* according to a different 'mode'.⁶⁴⁹ Using, for example, the perfection 'goodness', goodness is 'common to' or belongs to God, angels, and humans, but each also has goodness in a unique way, i.e., in proportion to their 'being'. God is good in proportion to God's being, and angels and humans are good in proportion to their different way of

⁶⁴⁷ This kind of analogy applies *only* to perfections as well, though Johnson applies it to all 'names'. This position reflects that of Cajetan and Phelan, which is also Rahner's leaning. See *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (1964), cited by Kelly, *Rahner*, 99. Ironically, this view seems to advocate the kind of closed ontology that Rahner rejects outright. Cf. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 143n52. J. A. DiNoia contends that Suarez was influential in Rahner's thought. See "Karl Rahner," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n.28) 119.

⁶⁴⁸ Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 132, 134 (emphasis added).

⁶⁴⁹ Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 132, 133. For Rahner, '[T]hat which is expressed is ontologically identical with that which expresses it, since the appearance (symbol) is constitutive of the reality symbolized (the essence)'. Here we see the influence on Rahner's first ontological necessity – "the necessity for all beings to express themselves in order to realize themselves." If, however, God *must* express himself this way like all other beings so that 'symbolic' reality is common to God and humans, then, states Molnar, human being only differs in degree, not in kind. "Can We Know God Directly?" 251, 258.

being.⁶⁵⁰ These claims, however, raise inherent problems when it comes to asserting that God is outside any genus in an attempt to preserve God's transcendence and the necessary Creator-creature distinction.

Aquinas (and Johnson!)⁶⁵¹ constantly emphasises that God cannot be subsumed under a genus or class. This is why he specifically rejects what he calls analogies of 'many to one' or 'two to a third' in favour of the analogy of 'one to another' in speaking of God and creatures. He recognises that the first two types of analogy put God on the same level as finite beings. In other words, they *subsume Him under categories*, and, therefore, 'annihilate His uniqueness'.⁶⁵² 'Good', for instance, is predicated of God and creatures as an abstracted *tertium quid* in which they both share. This implies, however, that *something other than God is prior to God and big enough to include God* in its limits.⁶⁵³ For Johnson, this *tertium quid* is 'relational being' itself. Thus, despite her declaration that 'being' is not a genus or category, she also states that 'the ontological language of being has the advantage of providing an all-inclusive category for reality at large, leaving nothing out', which includes God.⁶⁵⁴ Hence their proportionate share in 'relational being' is the ground for speaking of God and creatures in the broadest sense.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵⁰ There is not a direct equivalence between these proportions but rather 'a proportion of proportions'. In Phelan's words (referring to the perfection 'knowledge'), "the proportion between knowledge and angels holds ... and the proportion between knowledge and man holds ... (and finally) there is proportion between the way the first proportion holds and the way the second proportion holds." *Saint Thomas and Analogy*, cited by Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 132-33. In the analogy of intrinsic attribution, on the other hand, 'Names applied to God and to other beings are predicated according to the analogy of one to another. The ground of this analogy is the causal relation that things have to God. With respect to the perfection signified God is the first analogate; with respect to the mode of signification God is the secondary analogate'. Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 34.

⁶⁵¹ E.g., *SWI*, 240.

⁶⁵² Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 34-35.

⁶⁵³ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 24, 34.

⁶⁵⁴ *SWI*, 237.

⁶⁵⁵ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 41. Mondin argues that Suárez opposed Cajetan at this critical point when he stated that 'Aquinas refuses to recognize any analogy of proportionality between God and creatures'.

Perhaps it is in this context that she awaits a new word that will include within its scope 'holy mystery', the reality of women and all of creation.

This understanding results in God being not only *integral to* but ultimately *integrated with* the 'analogical whole' of Creator and creation such that a necessary relation seems inevitable in both directions.⁶⁵⁶ God is *intrinsically* connected to the world so as to be somehow conditioned by it. In other words, God creates the world out of necessity and 'natural order' rather than absolute freedom. Aquinas seeks to avoid this relation by assigning an exclusive position in theological language to the principle of 'one to another' based on efficient causality, indicating a 'causal nexus' between God and creatures and maintaining God's priority over creatures in 'absoluteness and uniqueness'.⁶⁵⁷ As we have seen, however, this is *not* a problem for Johnson; rather it is fundamental to her relational ontology. Thus, it does not seem to be a problem in terms of speaking of God from experience *as* the concomitant experience of God, 'proportionally' speaking.

The problem seems to have more to do with her use of the *via analogia* in general. As an appeal to certain metaphysical and philosophical principles to ground one's understanding of the God-world relation and God-talk, does it not inherent subsume God under these categories? For instance, even though Mondin critiques Phelan's interpretation for subsuming God under a genus, Mondin makes a similar move by espousing that for Aquinas, intrinsic attribution rests on the principle that 'every agent acts in a way similar to itself'.⁶⁵⁸ As Torrance observes, Mondin's entire thrust is to show that the roots of Thomistic analogy are found in this cosmological principle – the

⁶⁵⁶ *Persons in Communion*, 135.

⁶⁵⁷ Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 139. Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 35, 50.

⁶⁵⁸ *The Principle of Analogy*, 67.

'universal' similarity between agents and that which they cause to exist or produce – believing that Aquinas holds this principle and that of efficient causality to be 'self-evident'.⁶⁵⁹

If, however, God as Creator is transcendent and fundamentally *different* from all created participants in being, how is the integration of God *with* 'the analogical whole' true to God's nature?⁶⁶⁰ The principle of likeness between agents and between causes and their effects is applicable to God and God's relation to the created order. This means that God is necessarily subsumed under a kind of generic category, namely, the class of 'agents' to whom it universally applies that their actions bear some likeness to themselves.⁶⁶¹ Though Johnson fails to follow the principle of analogy carefully, it is the inferences she draws from this general, metaphysical principle that eventually lead her to think of the God-world relation as an 'analogical whole'. Moreover, she is led to ask

⁶⁵⁹ Mondin defends his interpretation from these principles. E.g., he states that by saying that God and creatures share *intrinsically* in the thing signified, Aquinas is *not* speaking univocally of a 'third thing' ('goodness') that they each hold in proportion to their way of being. Rather, 'good' is intrinsic primarily and perfectly in God as first cause or agent – God is 'good'. Creatures are 'good' *because* God is good and as his effects they bear similarity to him in a secondary way. *Ibid.*, 34, 67. In either case, notes Torrance, the underlying problem exists. *Persons in Communion*, 143. The lack of objective reference is precisely Barth's difficulty with the *via analogia* and its foundation in the *analogia entis* as a natural theology: It runs the same risks as any other natural theology – the criteria and controls for knowledge and speech about God are external to God as he has made himself known and spoken his own Word in Jesus Christ. The basis for human talk about God is independent of God's Self-talk in the realm of humanity. Thus it falsely subsumes God's revelation under a fallen, human rubric of knowing and speaking. Barth insists that God is simply not available to us this way. That we can only speak of God analogously is true, but the ground of our speech is not based on some natural cause and effect relation to God. Rather, it is because God has commandeered our words and concepts through his revelation and has given them a capacity which exceeds their natural semantic range.

⁶⁶⁰ *Persons in Communion*, 135. Torrance raises Barth's question, namely, 'whether the very different ontological identification with the created order which stems from the affirmation of the *homoousion*, as this safeguards divine freedom, does not render inappropriate and unnecessary any such universal ontological framework as a means of undergirding theological description'. As we noted in the last chapter, this identification is anything but necessary for Johnson's theological description or relational ontology.

⁶⁶¹ 'Put simply', says Torrance, 'the argument involves projecting on to God a conception of agency formed in the context and deriving from finite experience, and doing so in a manner that subsumes God under a category with respect to whose members certain rules must apply' (*Persons in Communion*, 143-44).

whether it is ever appropriate to speak of God in the singular, i.e. without including 'the world' in every sentence!

Despite the presupposition of ontological distinction, one that Johnson believes is inherent in the 'negating moment' of agnostic analogy, the integration of God *with* 'the analogical whole' under a larger rubric blurs that distinction. As Torrance states:

If we are to project anthropomorphic models or formulas rooted in human experience on to the Being of God then the Transcendence and Pre-eminence of God that Aquinas was so eager to safeguard is put at risk. By the same form of reasoning we cannot ground human talk about God in a principle of the form 'every agent acts in a manner similar to itself' where such a principle is grounded in a conception of the world rooted in human observations operative within that world. A cosmology which sees God as forming part of a whole characterised by such principles (and which are in turn, therefore, the product of human speculation) cannot do justice to the God who is deemed to be Infinite and Transcendent – let alone, as traditional Thomism requires, Absolute.⁶⁶²

Johnson's relational ontology makes her susceptible to this charge. God and humanity are governed by the same rules as members of the category of being. This threatens to limit divine freedom to the conditions of the finite subject. Transcendence is further compromised if Johnson's claim that 'the experience of self is the concomitant experience of God' ultimately means that 'God', or that to which 'God' refers, is assimilated into our own being. Either God's transcendence is effectively denied or else the creature is potentially deified. This not only leads down the road to pantheism – somewhere Johnson is loathe to go *because it is all-subsuming*, but the concept of analogy – either of intrinsic attribution or proportionality – is lost.⁶⁶³ At the very least, we

⁶⁶² Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 145.

⁶⁶³ In Torrance's critique of theological language, he reminds us that, in any case, '[i]t becomes inappropriate to think in terms of the traditional tidy distinctions between intrinsic attribution, extrinsic attribution and the various forms of analogy. There are fuzzy boundaries between terms and a semantic openness which must not be ignored if one is to avoid misinterpreting what one is doing when one engages in theological affirmation'. His emphasis is that theological approaches and terms should be 'reverently *a posteriori*' and thus have a willingness to acknowledge that, with respect to the theological uses of its terms, the various contexts of their use demand a degree of flexibility and open-endedness. The subject-

are only speaking of our own experience on the assumption that we are agnostically 'naming' the Nameless.⁶⁶⁴ This, again, seems to risk leading Johnson into a univocal, as opposed to analogical, form of God-talk. Ironically, this movement exposes the link between univocal predication and agnosticism.

B. Symbolic, Metaphorical God-Talk

Tillich and the Instrumentalist Use of the Symbol

In a statement that reveals the instrumentalism inherent within Catholic reformism

Rosemary Ruether boldly asserts:

Feminist theology starts with anthropology, rather than deducing male-female relations from an *a priori* definition of God. The definition of God as patriarchal male is presumed to be a projection [upon God] by patriarchal males of their own self-image and roles ... Thus it is not 'man' who is made in God's image, but *God who is made in man's image* ... Feminist theology ... assumes that all of our images of God are human projections. ... The question is: what are worse projections that promote injustice and diminished humanness, and what are better projections that promote fuller humanness?⁶⁶⁵

This pattern follows that of Tillich, Kaufman and Geertz, where the adequacy of a religious symbol is judged according to an *a priori* ethic.⁶⁶⁶ As Kaufman insists, 'all concepts of God ..., including that of scripture and faith, must be understood as creations of the human imagination; the 'real' God is never available to us or directly knowable by

matter will then instigate the semantic shifting or 'commandeering' necessary to allow for objectivity in semantic reference. *Persons in Communion*, 332.

⁶⁶⁴ For this reason, says Francis Martin, 'the feminist interpretation is not theology in any sense of the term [when read against the understanding of the early Christians]; there is no thinking with assent, if assent means consenting to the light of revelation. It represents a capitulation to the Enlightenment refusal to accept any interventions of God in this world. There is no revelation, and there is no body of texts that expresses the church's interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ [as a matter of faith]'. *TFQ*, 205.

⁶⁶⁵ Ruether, "Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," 286 (emphasis added). Describing this as 'instrumentalist' rather than 'realist' theology, Janet Soskice argues that in this approach to God-talk, religious symbols are *second order predications* pointing to a particular kind of mediated experience and referring to the state of the experiencing subject, not to what is being experienced. Instrumentalist metaphors are 'convenient fictions for the ordering of observables', she states, rather than referring in a real sense to something other than the speaker. 'By theological instrumentalists I mean those who believe that religious language provides a useful, even uniquely useful, system of symbols which is action guiding for the believer, but which is not to be taken as making reference to a cosmos-transcending being in the traditional sense. ... By theological realists I mean here those who, while aware of the inability of any theological formulation to catch the divine realities, nonetheless accept that there are divine realities that the theologians, however ham-fistedly, are trying to catch.' *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 120.

⁶⁶⁶ Johnson references and cites all three in support of her method. Cf. *SWI*, 3-4, 37, 45-6, 210.

us'.⁶⁶⁷ In Johnson's words, 'Just as we know the world only through the mediation of imaginative constructs, the same holds true for human knowledge of God'.⁶⁶⁸

Along this vein, Johnson asks, 'what is the right way to speak about God that promotes co-equal human flourishing'? This, she argues, is a question of unsurpassed importance: 'What is at stake is the truth about God, inseparable from the situation of human beings, and the identity and mission of the faith community itself.'⁶⁶⁹ In other words, 'what is the right way to speak about God' as a symbolic construction of our own devising that promotes our own worth and values? This, however, is theologically *apropos*, since it is 'clear' there has never been 'timeless speech' about God in the Jewish or Christian tradition: As cultures shift so does the 'specificity' of God-talk.⁶⁷⁰ By failing to acknowledge this, traditional Christian theology has failed both in what it says and how it says it. It not only uses the wrong words but also uses them wrongly.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁷ *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 113. Kaufman asserts that our choice of language for God should be based on its usefulness toward encouraging human (and nonhuman) flourishing. Specifically, 'Theology also serves human purposes and needs and should be judged in terms of the adequacy with which it is fulfilling the objectives we humans have set for it ... all religious institutions, practices and ideas - including the idea of God - were made to serve human needs and to further our humanization'. In *The Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 28. See also, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 72. For a discussion of Kaufman's anti-Realism tendencies, see Plantinga, *The Twin Pillars*, 16.

In Geertz's formulation of the power of religions to structure the world, 'There is an interdependent relation between a religion's symbol system, the moods and motivations it establishes, its concept of the general order of things, and the *aura of factuality* that surrounds both the moods and the concepts'. 'Religion as a Cultural System,' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90 (emphasis added). Garrett Green refers to this approach as 'role-model theology', in 'The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor,' in *Speaking the Triune God*, 48.

For a specific treatment of how Tillich's thought has been incorporated into Catholic feminist theology, particularly in the work of Ruether, Daly and Carr, see Mary Ann Stenger, 'Paul Tillich and the Feminist Critique of Roman Catholic Theology,' in *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parella (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 174-188; and Linda Moody, *Women Encounter God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁶⁶⁸ *SWI*, 46. Words about God, she maintains, (6) 'are cultural creatures', entwined with the mores and adventure of the faith community that uses them.

⁶⁶⁹ *SWI*, 4, 6; 'A Theological Case for God-She,' 12. Johnson echoes Pannenberg (*Basic Questions in Theology* I [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970], 211) at this point. 'A crucial, if not the most basic question of theology is the question about the right way to speak of God'.

⁶⁷⁰ *SWI*, 6.

⁶⁷¹ Reno uses this language to describe Johnson's critique of the tradition in 'Feminist Theology', 170.

Johnson takes the view that Christianity is, in the end, a religious symbol system. She therefore claims to hold a 'symbolic realist' position, one that incorporates Tillich's theory of religious symbols.⁶⁷² Here there is an inseparable dialectic between symbol and experience based on Tillich's understanding of correlation. Although he asserts that the primary correlation is the divine/human relation, or the relation between the reality of God as the 'ground of being' and human finite reality, Tillich argues for correlation as an expression of the relation of the ground of being and *every* finite reality. 'Where the finite is correlated to the infinite in such a way that *every finite* participates in the infinite and *everything* points to the ground of being, it is natural that *anything* is capable of being a symbol of the ultimate, a medium for revelation'.⁶⁷³

Religious symbols are actually non-literal representations of a transcendent reality disclosed by, communicated through and experienced in them. In short, this view 'allows for a transcendent reality *beyond the human* to which the symbols ultimately refer'.⁶⁷⁴ Tied to 'graced' human nature, they have an 'unconstructed' dynamic character through their *ontological* participation *in* that to which they refer (transcendent 'being').⁶⁷⁵ Just as

⁶⁷² "The Symbolic Character," 20. Of the three approaches summarised by Lonnie Kliever ("Alternative Conceptions of Religion as a Symbol System," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 27 (Winter, 1972): 91-102), Johnson defends this option over the symbolic 'reductionism' of Feuerbach and Freud or the 'formism' of Cassirer, Langer, et. al. It is important to remember that these assumptions are also imbedded in Rahner's symbolic ontology to a significant degree as well.

⁶⁷³ Mondin, 133, citing Tillich (emphasis added).

⁶⁷⁴ "The Symbolic Character," 319.

⁶⁷⁵ *SWI*, 46. Johnson argues that although Tillich never satisfactorily explains how the notion of symbolic participation works, he 'obviously intended to indicate ontological relationship or "belonging" between the symbol and what it represents' (cf. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 177; vol. 2, 9). "The Symbolic Character," 321. Johnson also refers to Ted Peters' vigorous defence of this relationship between symbol and referent, though she parts company with Peters when it comes to making reference too objective. "The Problem of Symbolic Reference," *Thomist* 44 (January, 1980): 72-93. Even as Johnson refuses to objectify transcendent reality, says Kliever, her approach is critiqued precisely for its 'objectivist' bias. 'In basing [religious symbols] on a transcendent reality, the symbolic realists variously argue that symbols which are real in their consequences must be real in their components. Real effects must follow from real causes'. But their claims for this transcendent reality 'rest on appeals to privileged access or to self-confirming presuppositions'. "Alternative Conceptions," 99-100. We take this up in the next section on conflicting appeals to experience.

the changing experience of God is mediated 'primordially' through the changing history of oneself, so too is the changing but 'intrinsic' relation between the self and the *symbol* of God.⁶⁷⁶ Hence the 'nature of symbols for divine mystery' is 'rather plastic'. There is no direct one-to-one correspondence or direct reference involved between a symbol and what it signifies.⁶⁷⁷

'Tillichian' symbolism in its many forms shares certain commonalities with Thomistic analogy. God is the ground of being in which everything participates; nothing is identical with God so there can be only symbolic manifestations from finite reality which supposedly only God can actively turn into actual religious symbols. However, they are two *different* interpretations of theological language, despite Tillich's claim that his theory means "exactly what St. Thomas means with *analogia entis*."⁶⁷⁸ When Tillich says that everything can (and can *only*) be predicated of God *symbolically*, this does not mean *analogically*. Aquinas contends that in *analogy* some names are predicated literally, some symbolically, and some neither way. In analogy, a kind of 'literalness' is also preserved in the names of God by distinguishing between the mode (creaturely) and the thing signified (predicated 'literally'), attempting to uphold transcendent distinction.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁶ *SWI*, 65, 67.

⁶⁷⁷ "The Symbolic Character," 322.

⁶⁷⁸ Mondin believes that part of this identification is due to Tillich's indiscriminate and equivalent use of the terms 'metaphorical', 'symbolic' and 'analogical' in his theory. Mondin, 144. In his essay "Symbol and Analogy: Tillich and Thomas," in *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought*, ed. Thomas F. O'Meara and Donald M. Weisser (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1969), 228, George McLean reaches the same conclusion regarding Tillich's equating symbol with analogy and symbolic participation with Aquinas's *analogia entis*. Tillich equates analogy with symbolic language through the use of his principle of correlation, arguing that anything is capable of being a symbol or medium of revelation. Without the principle of intrinsic attribution, however, which limits proper analogies for God, the *thing signified* (God) and the *mode* (human being and language) become intermingled, thus breaking down the God-world distinction. Mondin argues that correlation denies the infinite distance between God and man by making them interdependent, such that Tillich is unable to safeguard God's transcendence. Mondin, 127-132.

⁶⁷⁹ Soskice also speaks of the literalness of analogy which she says is not concerned, as metaphor is, with expanding descriptive powers: 'Analogy as a linguistic device deals with language that has been stretched

In what seems a rather loose amalgamation of these two systems, Johnson claims to follow Tillich's view of religious symbols by asserting first, that they participate in and point to '*something* beyond themselves' which at the same time 'cannot be *objectified*', and second (under the influence of Rahner), that they open up two levels of reality – ultimate transcendence *and* the transcendental depths of our self-awareness *which would otherwise remain closed*.⁶⁸⁰ Tillich, however, actually claims to move away from such wholly subjective 'negative' theories like Johnson's.⁶⁸¹ Maintaining that true symbols 'function' in two ways, Tillich asserts an essential relation in the symbol to both its subjective reference *and* its *objective* reference. Symbols operate *subjectively* by opening up levels of human interiority. They also operate *objectively* by opening up levels of objective reality otherwise 'hidden'. In this way symbols involve a subjective relationship to the 'user' (or constructor) *and* they 'participate' in the 'object' to which they refer.⁶⁸²

Although Tillich maintains that *religious* symbols *require* this kind of correlation, a definite one-sidedness comes into play when determining the 'truth' or 'adequacy' of the symbol. Suddenly the objective reference disappears and the criterion for the 'truth' of the symbol is solely its *subjective acceptance* by the finite subject. The objective correlation is entirely disregarded in favour of the subjective. If the symbol is 'accepted'

to fit new applications ... without generating for the native speaker any imaginative strain'. *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 66, 64.

⁶⁸⁰ "The Symbolic Character," 321. Does this mean that the 'graced Spirit' only brings us to awareness of that which we are and what is beyond us *via* symbols? Though this understanding is culled primarily from Tillich and Ricoeur, Rahner's influence is also clear. Johnson draws from several of Tillich's works, including *Systematic Theology*; vols. 1-3; "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," and "The Religious Symbol," in Sidney Hook, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 3-11 and 301-321. Also Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1962): 191-218; *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347-57; and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976).

⁶⁸¹ I am indebted to Mondin's analysis of Tillich. See *The Principle of Analogy*, 118-146.

⁶⁸² Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy*, 125.

by the subject, it is deemed 'alive' and 'true'; if 'rejected', it is 'dead' and 'false'.⁶⁸³ In Johnson's words, 'truth' is tested by the extent to which the current 'idea of God' and its symbolic expression takes account of 'accessible reality' and integrates 'experience' into itself. 'If the idea of God does not keep pace with developing reality, the power of experience pulls people on and the god dies, fading from memory'.⁶⁸⁴ As Ruether asserts, 'if a symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead or must be altered to provide a new meaning'.⁶⁸⁵

In a sense, then, Johnson, Ruether and their colleagues do in fact incorporate Tillich's actual theory, despite his defense of an objective 'referent'. That incorporation, however, is the problem. On the one hand, Johnson argues 'transcendentally' that the symbol's *own inner structure* 'guides' interpretations in specific directions by *pointing to something* identifiable as 'valid' or 'true' (i.e., whose reality content derives from and points to one thing and not another).⁶⁸⁶ On the other hand, the privatised subjectivity of

⁶⁸³ Mondin points out that it is actually meaningless to speak of 'dead' symbols if one follows Tillich's theory faithfully. *False* symbols may fail the adequacy test – which technically should mean they fail to open up the subjective dimension that corresponds to the reality of their objective reference – but they are still 'alive'. 'Dead' symbols aren't symbols at all. Furthermore, Tillich's original theory does not even consider this a viable test for symbols, which, unlike *signs*, are non-arbitrary. *The Principle of Analogy*, 122, 125-27.

⁶⁸⁴ *SWI*, 15-16. Johnson regularly echoes Ruether's repristination of Tillich at this point in rejecting Christian symbols as patriarchal, And with it a Schleiermacherian line of thought in regard to revelation: 'We must postulate that every great religious idea begins in the revelatory experience. By *revelatory* we mean breakthrough experiences beyond ordinary fragmented consciousness that provide interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the *whole* of life'. Such revelation always starts with a breakthrough in an individual consciousness and is mediated to and embraced by the collective consciousness of the community. Ruether claims that a religious tradition remains vital so long as its 'revelatory' symbolic pattern can be generationally reproduced and continues to speak effectively and redemptively into the present individual and collective experience. Using the criterion of 'subjective acceptance', women judge the 'truth' or vitality of the tradition. *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12, 13.

⁶⁸⁵ *SWI*, 12-13. Tillich contradictorily claims that it is not the task of theology 'to create religious symbols' (which should actually be *impossible* if they have a necessary character deriving from their objective referent), nor 'disregard traditional Christian symbols', while simultaneously arguing that symbols are "'creations of the human mind'" or "'created ... by the collective unconscious.'" *Systematic Theology* I, 240. This contradiction carries through in Johnson's approach. See, e.g., "The Symbolic Character," 321.

⁶⁸⁶ *SWI*, 47. Without some level of objectivity, she could neither identify the direction being taken nor the right 'destination'.

the symbol, its pliability, even its 'extinction' implies that the 'thing' to which it points has no objective reality or distinct self-definition apart from the subject or from a function designated by the subject.⁶⁸⁷ Its 'reality' is based on its meaningfulness to the human subject rather on any reality inherent in the thing itself. If, as Johnson asserts, this includes symbols for God, then God has no inherent, 'objective' reality, and language for God has no 'public' meaning. Knowledge of and language for God all comes down to the 'private' source and criteria of the human subject. This, as has been argued from the beginning, is illogical and invalid. (Even the above sentence implies that we are engaged in the same 'language game' at some level to have this debate.)

At this stage, we simply ask how, by this method, Johnson can claim that her 'symbol' for 'God' (or rather the God-world relation) maintains the asymmetrical distinction and freedom she deems necessary to fit the 'contours of the Christian faith'?

McFague's Influence

A basic agnosticism and projectionism can be found in McFague's 'metaphorical' approach, aspects of which Johnson wholeheartedly endorses and incorporates.⁶⁸⁸ Like Johnson, McFague argues that one's awareness of 'being' requires a 'symbolical sensibility' regarding cosmic interconnectedness. Worldly beings are analogously related to divine Being-Itself in 'a *silent* ontological web'.⁶⁸⁹ This silence is so profound,

⁶⁸⁷ Mary Ann Stenger notes that Catholic feminists are quick to absorb Tillich's critique of 'idolatrous' (exclusive, literalised) symbols but not so quick in holding to his understanding of the essentially paradoxical nature of the symbol; that as 'reality' it manifests the 'ultimate' without *being* the 'ultimate'. "Paul Tillich and the Feminist Critique," 175. Mondin notes that the danger of symbols is not an identification of the symbolic meaning with the symbolic material, 'but with a misplacement of the symbolic meaning either by putting a symbolic meaning where there is none or by attributing to an object a symbolic meaning different from the one it has', e.g. the adoration of Moses (or, we would argue, the adoration/reification of 'Sophia'). Mondin, 142-43.

⁶⁸⁸ McFague describes her 'metaphorical' approach as 'the creative activity of the human imagination seeking to provide more adequate orientation for human life, essentially by way of the act of imaginative construction'.

⁶⁸⁹ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 6 (emphasis added).

however, that McFague describes her metaphorical approach as 'precisely the refusal to identify human constructions with divine reality'.⁶⁹⁰ This is not to say that the 'real' god does not exist or is not like our constructs; it is to emphasise that our only access to knowledge of God is limited to metaphorical thought and speech.⁶⁹¹ Only our reflection on metaphor or story provides the epistemological and methodological foundations for 'processive', 'tentative' knowledge of God. '[H]ow language, any language, applies to God we do not know, what religious and theological language is at most is metaphorical forays attempting to express experiences of relating to God'.⁶⁹² The meaning and meaningfulness of the metaphor is its proven effectiveness, i.e., its ability to 'function' as a tool of persuasion or ready assimilation into the 'Christian' consciousness.

McFague does something similar to Johnson's use of the *via analogia* against the backdrop of transcendent unknowability to create multiple possibilities for naming God. She contends that metaphor consists in both the assertion and the denial of a proposition, thus creating innumerable possibilities of meaning in the tension between the two.⁶⁹³ Thus, no metaphor can be excluded from consideration. Her instrumentalist-projectionist approach is explicit: 'We are not dealing, on the one hand, with 'reality as it is' and, on the other, with views of it, but solely with the latter'.⁶⁹⁴ In other words, our language is not descriptive of what *is*. Rather, we are dealing with the innumerable perceptions and

⁶⁹⁰ McFague, *Models of God*, 22.

⁶⁹¹ Like Johnson, McFague argues that such constructions speak not of God but of 'God concepts'. At its core, says McFague, theology is 'mostly fiction: it is the elaboration of key metaphors and models'. It's just that 'some fictions are better than others'. Though she has not 'found it possible as a contemporary Christian to support an incarnational christology or a canonical Scripture', she nevertheless maintains that her approach is both Christian and contemporary, though 'surely, not the only contemporary or Christian way'. *Models of God*, xii, viii. For an on-point critique of McFague's understanding of 'Christian criteria' and her linguistic approach, see Colin Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes: A Study in the Dialectic of Language in Disagreement with Sallie McFague," in *Speaking the Christian God* (see n. 636) 65-80.

⁶⁹² *Models of God*, 39.

⁶⁹³ Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 65.

⁶⁹⁴ *Metaphorical Theology*, 134.

interpretations of innumerable thinking subjects rather than the revealing object, or in the case of God, the revealing Subject.

McFague considers her approach to use from both traditional analogy and the metaphysical principle of 'interrelationality'. She assumes that God is dependent upon and intrinsically related to the world. (The doctrine of the Trinity simply gives dogmatic status to this inherent relational principle.)⁶⁹⁵ Thus, the 'truest' conceptions we can image to speak of God are images of relationships. What God is apart from them, 'we do not know'.⁶⁹⁶ Though 'we do not know God's "nature,"' our images of God refer to 'the power with whom we are aware of being in relationship'.⁶⁹⁷ In short, we are somehow 'in relation with' as well as 'related to' a metaphysical concept ('God') through the symbols or metaphors we construct to express our relational experience. Whereas we *do not* know the divine reality of which we speak, we *do* know the symbol of *our* relational experience. Thus the metaphor 'refers' to our relational awareness or to our

⁶⁹⁵ *Models of God*, 112-13.

⁶⁹⁶ *Models of God*, 166. In *Metaphorical Theology*, McFague ties Luther's insistence that we can only know God *pro nobis* and not *deus absconditus* to Tillich's distinction between the symbol 'God' and God as 'Being-Itself': 'the former is the God in relationship to us to whom our images refer, while the latter is beyond our knowing' (96-97).

⁶⁹⁷ *Metaphorical Theology*, 97. Responding to the critique of arbitrariness regarding her metaphors of loving relationships 'in God' ('are these loves descriptive of God as God is?'), McFague presses the ontological point: '[I]t seems to me to be a Christian is to be persuaded that there is a personal, gracious power who is on the side of life and its fulfillment, a power whom the paradigmatic figure of Jesus of Nazareth expresses and illuminates; but when we try to say something more, we turn, necessarily, to the "loves" we know (unless one is a Barthian and believes that God defines love and that all human love only conforms to the divine pattern) ... I do not know who God is, but I find some models better than others for constructing an image of God commensurate with my trust in God as on the side of life. God is and remains a mystery' (*Models of God*, 192n37, emphasis added).

McFague argues that her view is not pantheistic because God is not reduced to that which we speak of metaphorically but is always 'more'. She does not explain, however, what 'persuades' her to trust that 'God' is a personal power 'on the side of life' nor why, as such, God cannot define love accordingly. As Daphne Hampson aptly states: '[W]hen all is said and done it is unclear to me whether in fact [McFague] is speaking of God, or rather an attitude of life' (*Theology and Feminism*, 158, 170). This tendency, and McFague's denial of the particularity of Christ, leads Hampson to ask why McFague calls herself a Christian rather than simply a humanist or whether (like Ruether) she is even a theist. Evangelicals Ray Anderson, Colin Gunton and Leslie Zeigler raise the same conclusions and questions in each of their essays found in *Speaking the Christian God* (see n. 636).

cognitive/intuitive ideal of human and cosmic relationships. McFague is concerned to choose relational metaphors that speak of God and the world reflect a mutual valuing and need for love in order to value the world properly. 'We need to feel that value [that God needs a lover] in the marrow of our bones if we are to have the will to work with the divine lover toward including all the beloved in the circle of valuing love' and 'attaining an ecologically balanced, nuclear free planet.'⁶⁹⁸

Paul Molnar critiques trends in contemporary theology regarding the role of experience and the locus of Trinitarian theology. In so doing, he looks specifically at the influence that McFague (and Kaufman) have on Johnson. Molnar believes that McFague makes it impossible to speak of the immanent Trinity and thus reduces speech about God to our human attempt to give meaning to our existence using theological categories. Since all that can be known is our experience, our supposed knowledge of God is simply projectionism (something McFague would probably not deny). This, in Molnar's view, leads McFague 'directly to the pantheism, modalism and dualism that mark her reflections'.⁶⁹⁹ He finds this same trend in Johnson's Trinitarian thought. She has an abstracted understanding of God, grounded neither in the immanent nor economic Trinity but in a general concept of relationality explicitly grounded in experience. In the end, says Molnar, 'it is the creature who defines the creator based on experiences of suffering within history.... It goes without saying that whenever God's relations to the world are thought to belong to his essence, then his creative function has absorbed his essence in

⁶⁹⁸ *Models of God*, 133.

⁶⁹⁹ "The Purpose of the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity," 7.

typically Cartesian fashion. Pantheism implies that God cannot exist without the world. Johnson's position clearly bears that out'.⁷⁰⁰

This is the difficulty that Johnson continually faces in her project – to hold to a panentheism that does not ultimately result in pantheism. With it is the increasing difficulty of keeping her God-talk from being merely univocal and projectionistic. When language for God is used instrumentally – to serve an idealistic purpose – its meaning is in one sense already 'in play' (which is *why* it 'functions'). The term is recognisable as representing *a human ideal*. Johnson argues, however, that if we change the symbolic God-talk of a community to reflect a 'new truth' (a different set of values) the community will change: 'Neither effect can be addressed in isolation ... Structural change and linguistic change go hand-in-hand'.⁷⁰¹ Where does meaning for the 'Trinity' come from in this case? How is this not ultimately univocal?

Colin Gunton describes the perils of McFague's 'Protean' view of language – those of projection and a weakening of criterion and control. Though this kind of metaphorical speech is capable of describing aspects of the scientific realm,⁷⁰² when it

⁷⁰⁰ "The Purpose of the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity," 25.

⁷⁰¹ *SWI*, 40.

⁷⁰² 'A word is used, as a metaphor, to refer. It then comes in time to refer literally to the same phenomenon, after which it takes on new metaphorical meaning when transferred to a new reference' (Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 72). Gunton may have in mind Soskice's critical realist argument. She maintains that metaphors are not reality producing but reality-depicting. Comparing the use of metaphors in scientific language, she argues that to make sense of the way that metaphors *do* function, we must assume that they do refer and provide us access to 'powers and structures', 'real entities, relations, and states of affairs' that exist independently of us. Even if such metaphors are never open to direct observation or if they do not provide direct or inexhaustible description (remaining 'transcendent'), those who use them still assume that they provide epistemic access to the real world: 'Scientific explanation, even in its reliance on models and analogues, is considered reality depicting'. In terms of reference, Soskice also considers the contextual speaker as an essential element, since ultimately it is not words that refer but speakers of those words, who understand their sense or meaning within a communal, historical context. With this in mind, she says, 'The meaning of terms in a language, or as we prefer, their sense, does have a part to play at one level of reference, but at another, reference is determined by speakers in contexts of use, and not simply by individual speakers but by communities of speakers whose language provides them access to the states and relations that are of interest to them. Reference, then, of the kind that interests us is social and is concerned with access. Senses of terms are important not so much for determining references as for guiding access'.

comes to theological speech, Gunton observes that a naïve idealism and agnosticism prevail. Similar to the way Johnson believes the Triune symbol has the capacity to make God's absolute unknowability 'knowable', McFague speaks of metaphors making 'the unintelligible intelligible'. In turn, Gunton asks, just what does McFague mean? Is it that by the metaphor we make intelligible that which is *intrinsically* and *essentially* unintelligible? Surely not, for this is logically impossible, as the case with Johnson's argument.

On the other hand, if she is speaking metaphorically in a way similar to the sciences, then, if we hold to the belief that science involves discovery and provides metaphors that are a 'genuine but partial *reflection of its reality*'⁷⁰³, does this not require at least some form of knowledge of what is, however inadequately it is expressed through language? 'Always', says Gunton, 'the distinction between critical realism and projectionism or constructionism is the question of God – namely, whether we are concerned with the articulation of the intrinsic intelligibility of the God who names and makes himself known in specific forms of relatedness to us, or simply with a less definite matter of naming God through certain experiences of self-reflection taken to be normative'.⁷⁰⁴

McFague and Johnson contend that we live in a relational universe as a network of particularities in dynamic interrelation that is contingent, marked by rich plurality, but is nevertheless is a unity. But, says Gunton, this view is no support for a relativist theory

Soskice draws the connection to theological language. The realist, she maintains, 'can coherently claim that his language is referential or, as we prefer, reality depicting, without claim to definitive knowledge' (*Metaphor and Religious Language*, 120, 132). Torrance critiques this 'world-transcendent', 'visual' approach as falsifying the relationship between language and the world by undermining the essence of language 'as an indwelt tool' (*Persons in Communion*, 347-349).

⁷⁰³ *Metaphorical Theology*, 99 (emphasis added).

⁷⁰⁴ Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 66-67.

of knowledge; in fact it is quite the reverse. To believe that we can say what we like as long as it expresses our 'relation' to that of which we have no true knowledge comes, he notes, from a dualistic view that in some way makes an absolute or near-absolute distinction between the unity-in-relatedness of reality and the apparently irreducible and incurable pluralism of the human response to it.⁷⁰⁵

Ultimately, these feminist theologians depend upon a distinction not between the ways in which words are used but between ways in which they are related to their objects of reference. This comes clearly into focus at the point of feminist rhetoric about traditional theological language. What Johnson and McFague argue against is 'literal' imagery in favour of metaphorical (or analogical, symbolic, etc.) imagery, where 'literal' equals 'picturing' and metaphor or 'analogy' is more allusive and indirect. Gunton elucidates:

McFague's trading upon a mistaken conception of the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical generates an unbalanced view of the relation between language and reality. The stages of the argument are basically as follows: 1. We interpret our world metaphorically. 2. Metaphor, in contrast to literal language, does not attempt to picture reality directly. 3. Therefore, metaphor is a form of indirect characterization of a kind that *does not really speak of reality at all*. Accordingly the way is open to project onto the deity any forms of relationality of which we happen to approve.⁷⁰⁶

If Johnson also makes this loose association between metaphor and 'divine reality', then, given her agnosticism, one is left wondering why (or how) she either would or could 'make ontological claims and draw references about the way things truly are' and/or write a treatise concerning 'the right way to talk about God'.

⁷⁰⁵ Gunton, "Proteus and Procrustes," 70.

⁷⁰⁶ "Proteus and Procrustes," 73.

II. Addressing the Problem of Distinction: Irigaray in Conversation with Barth and Johnson

A. Loss of the 'Other' and God-Talk as Projection: Irigaray and Barth

Given that problems that Barth raised concerning the oppressive potential of theology based on human experience and dominating philosophical principles, it is intriguing that some of these same methodological concerns are now being raised from within the feminist community itself. Despite Johnson's claim to have moved beyond Barth in her modern anthropological approach, postmodern and post-structuralist feminists in particular echo Barth's concerns regarding the controlling effects of universal principles to make claims for women or their experience. Serene Jones's essay on French feminist post-structuralist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray and Barth addresses this issue directly.⁷⁰⁷ According to Jones, Irigaray and Barth share two common traits: First, they both reject universal philosophical principles and controlling conceptual systems; second, they both constructively attempt to secure the 'identity in difference' of 'the other'. The 'other' for Irigaray is 'woman'; for Barth it is God. Each essentially argues that the systematic logic of philosophy – or any totalising cultural framework – excludes the possibility of admitting true difference. This is particularly the case when trying to identify subjects that are 'asymmetrical to' or 'incommensurable with' *the subject in control of the principles at work in the system*.

Ultimately, they both agree with Feuerbach; *in this system* modern theological language speaks only of humanity as a projection of itself. 'God' is merely 'the mirror of

⁷⁰⁷ "This God Which is Not One: Irigaray and Barth on the Divine," in *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, ed. C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville and Susan M. Simonatis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 109-141. While acknowledging that Barth and Irigaray would reject each other's underlying assumptions and conclusions, Jones nevertheless makes a compelling case for comparing and contrasting their thought.

man'.⁷⁰⁸ In this way Irigaray and Barth share in the same indirect critique of Catholic reformist theology – that as a modern enterprise it inevitably undermines its own ethical project by falling prey to the same dominating methodology, having merely changed the subject and value content. Our focus will stay on Irigaray for the moment.

Jones first compares Irigaray's critique of the 'phallogentrism' of Western philosophical thought and its 'logic of the same' with Barth's critique of liberal or natural theology and its subjective narcissism. Irigaray critiques the universal assumptions of historical, Western, philosophical thought (specifically its 'texts') which have tended toward a 'logic' or 'story of the same'. She believes this to be the male quest for identity (as the controllers of thought and text). All conceptual systems (axioms, ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies) revolve around a central, *a priori* ruling principle that consumes all ambiguities or bends them toward its 'center'.⁷⁰⁹

Philosophers attempt to achieve identity by placing the central principle in relation to its *binary opposite*. This way definition is marked off by developing boundaries to separate the conceptual space of the given identity by that of the non-identity or negativity around it – the 'other'.⁷¹⁰ Irigaray calls this way of conferring identity 'the play of difference'. In this process, the 'difference' of the binary opposite is only a negative reflection of 'the one': 'The "other" or the "opposite" finds its being or nonbeing, its shape and form, its meaning and function conferred only to the degree that it either mirrors back the attributes of the center or, in its negativity, provides the center

⁷⁰⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 63. 'Man ... projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject'. As Garrett Green has also noted, the irony of Eliot's (female) rendering of *Mensch* (human being) as 'Man' would not be lost on Irigaray or feminists in general. See "The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor," in *Speaking the Christian God* (see n. 636) 47n3.

⁷⁰⁹ Irigaray describes this as a 'proclivity for monadic totalization'. Jones, "This God," 113.

⁷¹⁰ Jones, "This God," 113.

with the edge that marks its own defining contours'.⁷¹¹ In this economy of relations, woman is the opposite 'other' to the degree that she plays the role of the 'mirror' that confers man's identity (or that of the central principle) by reflecting him back upon himself. In other words, the woman becomes a reference point not in her objective difference but in her existential demarcation of what is not the man as a matter of his own self-definition and self-limit. The identity of woman, or God, can never be rendered as anything other than that of 'man'.⁷¹²

Shifting to a model of psychoanalytic embodiment, she explains that women are only different to the degree that their 'otherness' serves the male phallus, or the central "phallogentric" principle. She generates and validates male identity and systems through her own lack of central identity as the 'systematic servant' to his sexuality. Her difference is not only suppressed but its possibility is annihilated. Man will never be the 'other' who serves the development of her self-identity or sexuality. If and when her identity is construed as more than just a 'little man', it is as the regenerative 'mother' whose difference generates *his* identity. In each of these roles, woman has no autonomous self-identity but exists in the realm of 'non-being' as a necessary reference point for male being.⁷¹³

What is really happening in this process, claims Irigaray, is an obsession with the identity of 'the one' driven by a 'logic of the same'. In essence, this process eliminates the possibility for true difference. In short, when the identity quest is combined with a proclivity to subsume all things under a central principle ('monadic totalization'),

⁷¹¹ Jones, "This God," 114.

⁷¹² Jones, "This God," 128. This repression of female identity in God is intentionally aimed at hiding women's generative power 'as the ground or body *in which divinity originates*' (122, emphasis added).

⁷¹³ She is subsumed under the logic of 'the same', exiled to the 'blind spot' of symmetry in Western historical thought. Jones, "This God," 115-116.

difference is suppressed, because all elements of the system only come to identity insofar as they mimic the 'primal identity' of the *a priori* 'master'. Difference in this system, argues Irigaray, is not *real*; in other words, it does not belong essentially to the 'other'.

Also, this system assumes God to be passive, just like the woman.⁷¹⁴ God has no identity independent of man. God is merely 'an imagined screen against which man projects his own identity and thereby secures the perimeters of his own subjectivity'.⁷¹⁵ Thus, Irigaray agrees with Feuerbach – and Barth – that God-talk is merely self-projection onto what we believe connotes 'the divine'.

Contrary to Irigaray, however, Barth does not consider it improper for a conceptual 'system' to determine the identity and freedom of the 'elements' within it. In other words, the subject matter should control the discipline. Where Barth is absolutely immovable is in his contention that this holds true for theology as well. And the Subject of theology is God. The formal and material content, the 'rules', the organising and governing criteria, are given by God *in God's* Self-gift of the Incarnation. If any other system is used to determine the identity and nature of God, then the system would try – improperly and *impossibly* – to subsume God as one of the elements within that system. The identity attributed to God would be one that drew its defining borders from rules that were *inappropriate* to its subject matter – namely, God himself. The logic internal to the system would govern the analysis, but the procedural rules would not properly be governed by the subject matter. In Jones' summary, 'When this occurs, the distinct identity of God as the self-generating, self-motivated subject is repressed and replaced by

⁷¹⁴ Irigaray relies on the negative dualisms (spirit-nature, male-female) inherent in the philosophical systems she rejects to make this comparison.

⁷¹⁵ Jones, "This God," 123.

an identity appropriate to the systematic mastery of the found and yet foreign conceptual scheme'.⁷¹⁶

For Barth, the truth of the gospel is self-authenticating and self-involving for those to whom it manifests itself. They cannot deny it once they have encountered it. They can only point others to it in the hope that they too may see, and hear, and obey, and thus enter into the community of faith, living life in accordance with the gospel. The gospel does not commend itself to some inherent sense of truth and goodness in humans. Rather, it is received as scandal, a word that contradicts accepted norms and mores. Barth insists, however, that the gospel is not scandalous to some supposed 'human reason'. That is an abstract fiction. 'Rather we are dealing with a clash between the faith commitments of the Christian community and those of other communities as they find articulation in contextually normative canons of rationality and credibility. It is unbelief to which the gospel is a scandal; a commitment to other truths, other gospels, other gods'.⁷¹⁷ Once this is seen, then it becomes clear how ridiculous it is to seek to afford the gospel warrant by appealing to prior canons of acceptability.

Barth specifically argued that by taking human experience as the starting point of theological reflection, God's identity is circumscribed by a conceptuality that originates from somewhere other than God's own self. If theology starts with subjective human introspection, the divine Word is nothing more than human self-talk. It is Feuerbach's projection of human desire falsely inscribed on a lifeless 'divine screen' ruled, in

⁷¹⁶ Jones, "This God," 127.

⁷¹⁷ Hart, "Truth, the Trinity and Pluralism," in *Regarding Karl Barth* (see n. 235) 131-32.

Irigaray's terms, by a 'logic of mimicry'. God mirrors back the narcissistic gaze of the philosopher/theologian.⁷¹⁸

For both Barth and Irigaray, what is essential is recognition of the 'incommensurable difference of the other'.⁷¹⁹ Of course, who they recognise as the primary 'other' – God for Barth, and 'woman' for Irigaray – affects every aspect of their thought. Irigaray contends that the violence of the philosophical game of universalising women's experience costs women their voices, their individual agency and their very identities as incommensurable 'others'. Barth, on the other hand, saw that the violence can cost lives – paid for at the expense of the truth of gospel. When projected ideology is universalised and used oppressively in the name of theology – to destroy Jews or blacks or women, etc. – the reality behind the violence is that the identity of God – *the* incommensurable Other – is obscured. The Word has been falsely spoken. This is the ultimate idolatry and the imprint of human fallenness.⁷²⁰ Moreover, without knowledge of the One who loves in freedom, the creature cannot know itself as loved and embraced in non-coercive communion.

B. Otherness, Projection and the Question of Distinction: Irigaray and Johnson

Irigaray's pragmatic goal as a feminist is to influence the emergence of new ethical and socio-political systems that recognise and promote women's difference in terms *other* than gender polarity. While she believes that language plays a constitutive role in the construction of the human subject, she also acknowledges that she can neither

⁷¹⁸ Jones, "This God," 128. This process also involves 'blind spots', explains Jones. To render its own subjective reflections divine, liberal theology represses or hides 'by sleight of hand' its own projective moment. 'In doing so, it falsely attributes an objective otherness to a divinity that in fact wears the face of its generative subject, "man."'

⁷¹⁹ Jones, "This God," 129.

⁷²⁰ Jones, "This God," 129.

jump out of her historical, discursive context nor its logic. To do so would be tantamount to jumping out of language itself.⁷²¹ Thus, if she cannot leave 'the game', as it were, her solution is to 'change the rules'. She wants to disrupt the system by using her own 'constructive ontology'.⁷²² This ontological orientation will 'create space' for women to carve out their *own* identity. Interestingly, this process of identity formation has a religious component.

First, Irigaray posits a different 'story' in the form of an alternative morphology derived from the female body. In her rhetorical strategy, women's bodily experience serves as the metaphor for their differential self-knowledge. Difference and 'otherness' is first contrasted anatomically and then in terms of the notion of the self.⁷²³ To 'throw a spanner' in the phallogocentric system, she goes on to describe women's essential relationality and self-identity in terms of sexual pleasure. Whereas the man needs an *external* other to 'touch' himself, woman 'touches herself' all the time without mediation (the 'two-lips' of her vulva in continual contact). She embodies her own alterity: 'She is indefinitely other within herself'.⁷²⁴

In short, in Irigaray's 'logic of the other', women establish *an internally self-related identity*. Paradoxically, rather than establishing true otherness through an ontology of relation, Irigaray's female 'other' defines herself *from* herself – self-referentially – rather

⁷²¹ Irigaray criticises Mary Daly and Hélène Cixous for ignoring this fact in their idealised critical stance. Jones, "This God," 117. Johnson, on the other hand, fails to account for the fact that the system she condemns is the same one in which women have experienced 'ideal' relationality. If the construction of the morally excellent 'female way' is inextricably bound to its social context, it is highly ironic that the 'context' out of which 'the ideal' has emerged is 'hopelessly patriarchal and androcentric'.

⁷²² Both Johnson and Irigaray are criticised by other feminists for the essentialism inherent in their 'ontological' constructions. But, says Jones, even the most pragmatic approaches recognise that Irigaray must 'run the risk of essentialism', if only 'momentarily', in order to argue for women's real identity as essentially and physically distinct from men. Jones, "This God," 120.

⁷²³ Women's bodies are the source of *jouissance* – their pre-Oedipal, pre-Symbolic *innocence* and thus unrepressed and authentic gender identity. Graham, *Making the Difference*, 175-78.

⁷²⁴ Jones, "This God," 119, citing Irigaray from, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 15-16.

than in external relation to 'the one' as an other.⁷²⁵ The female self doesn't need an objective other.⁷²⁶ 'Woman' can inherently be both the relational subject *and* object.

Second, Irigaray develops an image of God that reflects this idealised self-in-self-relation.⁷²⁷ She summarily rejects the Christian 'notion' of God as a primary example of the male 'logic of the same'. Nevertheless, she believes that 'religion' plays a critical role in the construction of women's *cultural* identity. She draws freely upon Feuerbach and Levinas at this point, assuming their assessment of religion to be *correct*, but in a positive sense. Religious discourse is merely projection. However, it represents the process whereby humans project an ideal self or subject into the future as that goal toward which they move in the dialectic of becoming. The 'conceptual system' of religion is even *necessary*, because it provides 'the discursive horizon of being' within which humans give shape to their identity and are drawn 'into the infinite plane of the future'.⁷²⁸ God functions as the 'other' or 'the form of alterity' which both constitutes and affirms the human.⁷²⁹ Women ultimately need the idea of 'God' to communicate with each other and

⁷²⁵ Jones, "This God," 115-119.

⁷²⁶ It is not within the limits of this thesis to engage in an extended critique of Irigaray's morphology (which Jones does more than adequately!). Let it be sufficient to state that her description of women as intimately 'self-related' is hardly 'disruptive' of the 'logic of the same'. Rather, it seems to perpetuate it in a different form. In her new configuration of the 'self-other' relation, Irigaray seems to present an extreme sublimation of distinct 'otherness'. As she wrestles with the possibility of 'knowing' the female self from a different story than that of historical 'sameness', she arguably perpetuates divine-human 'sameness', consuming and bending everything to the 'female' centre. Irigaray eliminates the basic need for a *distinct* 'other' as a relational 'partner' – that which constitutes true human relation and personhood.

⁷²⁷ Jones, "This God," 125.

⁷²⁸ Jones, "This God," 124.

⁷²⁹ Jones, "This God," 124. We are reminded again of Martin's comment regarding this ultimate irony of feminism which considers any form of passivity to be the same as inertia; that it treats God as the totally passive object of our intellectual and moral strivings. 'God does nothing, he is merely sought or interpreted'. *TFQ*, 263.

to 'become'.⁷³⁰ In a voice reminiscent of Schleiermacher, Ruether and Johnson, Irigaray states:

Only a God can save us [from division and tearing apart] ... The feeling or experience of a positive, *objective* and glorious existence for our subjectivity is necessary for us. Such a God who helps and guides us in our becoming, who holds the measure of our limits ... shows the way....God holds no obligation over our needs except to become. No task, no obligation burdens us except that one: *become divine*, become perfect, don't let any part of us be amputated that could be expansive for us.⁷³¹

In the end, Irigaray's self-projection of God ends up looking like her arguably *unitary* ideal 'woman' – the 'subject in relation to itself' – which is 'perfect'.

Johnson also understands the symbol of God to function subversively, to change the structures of Church and society. It is interesting that, like Irigaray, Johnson also offers an image of God as a 'self-relating' female figure, even as she also attempts to symbolise a 'relational' ontology. Ironically, Johnson does this in the midst of present 'triune' imagery, and in particular, a description of the 'divine friendliness' of the *hypostases*: Reaching for a 'trinitarian' analogy, she states: 'The image of a woman *being herself, expressing herself and befriending herself* in an inclusive moment that issues in *care for the world* forms one remote human analogue'.⁷³²

Thus, on the one hand, Johnson's ideal is a *unitary, self-befriending* 'God'. On the other hand, her God *includes the world* as an element of divine 'self-hood'. This means,

⁷³⁰ Martin reflects on the result of a loss of historical and linguistic 'mooring' in feminist theology and hermeneutics. Insistence on multiple valid symbols and multiple readings of Christian texts following their 'deconstruction', he notes, finds the linguistic subject unmoored in a sea of language with no stable reality. Meaning is postponed indefinitely. Theological speech is merely an instance of 'discourse', referring to nothing, with no corresponding identity or meaning. It is like, he remarks, a narrowly restricted photograph of a moving train. Not only are other angles of 'observation' or interpretation possible, but the whole is on the move toward an indeterminate goal which makes any 'reading' as good as another. 'When language is considered to be only a means of reinforcing power, then we have abandoned not only any possibility of communication but have also embraced a theory of knowledge that traps the thinking subject within her or himself, and we deny that any real knowledge of reality is possible' ('Feminist Hermeneutics,' 118-19, 129).

⁷³¹ Irigaray, "Divine Women," trans. Stephen Muecke (Sydney: Local Consumption Occasional Papers 8, 1986), 9, cited by Jones, "This God," 125-6.

⁷³² *SWI*, 218.

one of two very different things, however. Either (1) 'God-She' is like 'a woman being herself, expressing herself and befriending herself', in which case Her alterity is internally derived as She functions as the object of Her own subjective being and action. This means that She is essentially *non-relational*; there are no hypostases in relation nor is she essentially related to the world. Or (2) She is ontologically constituted by the world as Her inclusive, necessary 'other' *in order to* be Herself, express Herself and befriend Herself'. This means that distinction is eliminated for both Creator and creature; the world is simply a monistic emanation of the divine 'Self'.

Either of these possibilities does serious damage to Johnson's feminist vision of relation as 'radical equality' – not between 'half selves' but between 'whole persons' – where 'suppression and projection cease to distort the encounter'.⁷³³ It does even more damage to her Christian understanding of the necessity of distinguishing between God and creation. Finally, it raises serious implications for God-talk. How does Johnson refrain from univocity when the ontological distinction between God and creation is no longer meaningful, when God's transcendence and immanence are ultimately collapsed in a way similar to God's Triune immanence and economic action?

In placing Johnson's ontological-theological project in close proximity to that of Irigaray, two similar issues rise to the surface. The first has to do with Johnson's concepts of selfhood and relationality – and the over-arching question of the divine-human distinction as it comes to bear on these concepts. The second stems from her use of language, arguably *theological* language, to articulate or 'construct' these concepts.

Irigaray's morphology of women's 'embodied alterity' – being the 'other to oneself' – is explicit. Though Johnson's terms are different, she also seems to hold to the

⁷³³ *SWI*, 218.

view that women must first be a 'self-to-onese' before one can be a 'self-in-relation'. Like Irigaray, Johnson believes that women are involved in 'constructive ontology' through language. As 'active agents' they are 'creating themselves' through identity formation. Though feminism 'eschews the vision of the isolated moral agent', Johnson applauds women for 'constructing a moral universe' based on feminist relationality. Feminism abhors (male) 'nonrelational autonomy' as 'deficiently human'; Johnson, can thus affirm women's '*autonomy in relation*'. The ideal is 'the coinherence of autonomy and mutuality', such that women's freedom and self-identity are not 'given over' but given 'to' an 'other' on a voluntary basis.⁷³⁴ (Paradoxically, her ideal is based on voluntary rather than necessary relationships, despite the necessary interconnectedness of relational being.)

Thus, fundamental 'otherness' is not developed in terms of 'personhood' – either between human beings or God.⁷³⁵ Rather than thinking in terms of 'personhood', Johnson speaks more of women as 'selves', 'subjects' and 'beings'. The autonomous 'self' is *prior to* any relation. In a sense, she brings herself *as* a 'self' to another 'self' (the 'other') and they 'have' a relation (a thing constituted by them but which does not constitute them) as whole' persons. This negates the understanding of being and becoming a person *in relation* – that persons are not persons *apart from* relation. Here, it would seem, are 'whole selves' rather than 'whole persons'.

⁷³⁴ SWI, 68.

⁷³⁵ Nor we will adequately be able to address the distinction between selfhood and personhood here. A recommended text is Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

As we saw in chapter two, Johnson's anthropological assumption is that it is *individual*,⁷³⁶ transcendental, pre-cognitive *and* cognitive self-awareness as God-awareness that makes one a subject and a 'person'.⁷³⁷ This means that the *individualistic*, rational self is formed, at least at some level, independent of the *essential* relationality at the 'heart of all reality'. Even as she claims that women's relational experience is the determining source for truth about God and humanity, she ultimately appeals to women's *individual* 'conversion' experience as the *fundamental* experience of women's self-actualisation. What constitutes 'conversion'? It is a woman's 'awakening' to her own sense of worth and identity, to her true selfhood and potential for self-naming as an active subject.

This, she argues, 'is a deeply religious event, the coming into being of suppressed selves'.⁷³⁸ Moreover, a woman's self-identity is shaped by her 'self-awareness' as awareness of her share in divinity and her ability to 'name toward God'. Women can say 'i found god *in myself* and i loved her, i loved her fiercely'.⁷³⁹ In the end, says Johnson, 'In the *ontological naming and affirming of ourselves* we are engaged in a dynamic reaching

⁷³⁶ She notes the criticism Rahner received for his concentration on the individual 'in isolation from the constitutive relation to community, which provides the very tools of experience of self-including language'. We are not sure what she means by these 'tools', but in any case, she does not seem to make this corrective in her own thought. *SWI*, 66.

⁷³⁷ Kerr challenges this assumption of human 'transcendence' – that one can somehow position oneself outside one's physical world to observe that world. Kerr observes that at the heart of Rahner's *Spirit in the World* is the belief that whenever I know anything I also know that I do so and I know myself as I do so. In fact, says Kerr, 'Rahner switches from "knowledge" to "consciousness" words with no apparent difficulty. He thinks primarily of "knowledge of an object presenting itself from without" and is claiming that in all such knowledge one has an implicit awareness both of one's knowing and of one's own being. It is difficult to make out what this means'. From a perspective shaped by Wittgenstein, Kerr contends that it should not mean something more substantial than that we talk about our world. "Rahner Retrospective," 375, 378.

⁷³⁸ *SWI*, 64.

⁷³⁹ *SWI*, 67, citing Ntozake Shange from her play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ the rainbow is emuf* (New York: McMillan, 1976), 63 (emphasis added).

out to the mystery of God in whose being we participate'.⁷⁴⁰ Ultimately, her model of the mature female is the autonomous self-in-relation, not a person in relation. Because this model stems from concerns around domination, in a sense Johnson's model of ideal human love is not without condition – it is not truly free even at its most 'mature'.

This is a 'unipolar', non-relational approach to self-discovery, however. It relies on the modern philosophical principle of the human capacity to know and name one's subjective self as the *object* of self-reflection.⁷⁴¹ The self attempts to know the self as its own objective self-referent, in isolation – rather than in true relation – to the other. Both Johnson and Irigaray follow this assumption, while attempting to develop a relational ontology, so that the 'self' is never out of the 'control' of the female subject – *even in her essential relationships*.

The problem, as Torrance points out, is two-fold. First, it assumes, with Kant, that we each stand in passive relation to ourselves. The result is that the mind only intuits itself 'as it is affected by itself, and therefore as it *appears* to itself, not as it *is*'.⁷⁴² Given the dichotomy between the *noumenal* and the phenomenal, the self *cannot* be known as it really is but *only as it appears*. There is always an interpretive dimension between appearance and reality. *Consciousness* of the 'self' (interpretive awareness) cannot be *knowledge* of oneself. 'Appearance' is always just that – appearance. It requires interpretation through 'the eye of the beholder'. To follow the metaphor, the eye that beholds cannot also *be* the eye which it is beholding. In this non-relational, 'ever-

⁷⁴⁰ *SWI*, 67. Given Johnson's agnosticism, one wonders how she *knows* that it is the mystery of God and not simply Irigaray's projected ideal self or 'discursive horizon of being' toward which she is reaching. And is *this* analogical God-talk?

⁷⁴¹ Torrance shows how this premise has at least been questioned since David Hume's attempt to think it through in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and his conclusion that 'I cannot discover any theory which gives me satisfaction on this level'. Hume, 328, cited by Torrance, "The Self-Relation," 485, 500.

⁷⁴² *Critique of Pure Reason*, 68-69.

transcending' model, it is impossible to 'see' or know our 'true selves' or God.⁷⁴³ States Torrance: 'In Kantian language, God and also the self exist in the realm of the noumenal and therefore transcend the categories of knowing such that man's relation between the self and God ... can have no epistemic content. Faith and knowing inhabit different spheres. It follow therefore, that, just as there can be *no* 'knowledge' of God, there can also be no true 'knowledge' of the self as it really is - nor indeed of other selves'.⁷⁴⁴

Second, as we have stated, it does not take into account the understanding of knowledge of the self deriving from being in relation. To be a human is not to be an unencumbered, autonomous self nor to be merely an inter-related 'self'. To be human is to be a *creature* in relation to God as well as to other human and non-human beings. This relationality and this network of relations is wholly ontological, *in Christ* by the Spirit in the true *koinonia* that constitutes humanity as fellow-humanity in the Triune God.⁷⁴⁵ It finds its particular ground of being in the particular life and being of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, the truly human Son of God.

In spite of her relational ontology and Trinitarian symbol, Johnson certainly runs the risk of projecting this individualised self onto God. As we have argued, she does not seem to hold to a sense of 'personal' distinction in the Triune God. She makes the statement, 'The ontological priority of relation in the idea of the triune God has a powerful affinity with women's ownership of relationality as a way of being in the world ... Since the persons [of God] are constituted by their relationships with each other, each

⁷⁴³ The problem as Gilbert Ryle sees it, is that in attempts to 'self-reflect' one is 'always a day late for the fair'. Ryle, "The Systematic Elusiveness of "I," in *Concept of Mind*, 186, cited by Torrance, "The Self-Relation," 498.

⁷⁴⁴ "The Self-Relation," 489. In Kantian fashion, Bultmann states that God 'is beyond the world and beyond scientific thinking. At the same time, it calls man to his true self. For the self of man, his inner life, his personal existence is also beyond the visible world and beyond rational thinking'. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 40.

⁷⁴⁵ Barth, *C.D.* III.2, 285.

is unintelligible except as connected with the others. Relation is the very principle of their being'.⁷⁴⁶

And yet, in the end Johnson is agnostic about the immanent Trinity. There is also no economic Trinity. In Jesus Christ there is no divine Son to reveal the Father and to send the Holy Spirit, no Immanuel who in his humanity is empowered by the Spirit to walk in true cruciform obedience to the Father. In short, there is no divine 'encounter' through the divine-human person of Jesus Christ who reveals God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is simply 'relationality' as a *unified* concept – God *is*, expresses and befriends *herself* – which 'in an inclusive moment' issues in care for the world. What that 'care' looks like, Johnson does not say, other than to imply that it is to let the world 'be' *in God*.

This conflicting sense of the self in relation brings us back to Woodhead's different models of the modern 'self' discussed in chapter two. It was our sense that Johnson's transcendental self in relation bears most similarity to Woodhead's definition of the 'boundless self' – the amalgamation of the individualistic, 'rational self' and the 'bestowed self'. Again, the boundless self refuses to see itself as differentiated from God, other humans or the natural order while it continues to manifest the traditional 'turn to the subject'. This self-centring usurps God's freedom and self-determination such that the creature's identity and relationality are necessary to God's relationality and 'otherness'. Relationality, defined from the creature, subsumes distinction.

Here again, Irigaray and Johnson's view of the self, and ideas and models of God, are similar. Jones expresses similar concerns regarding Irigaray's sublimation of difference in the very model that is supposed to accentuate it. '[I]f the difference between

⁷⁴⁶ *SWI*, 216.

God and humanity cannot be affirmed, then how can difference between human persons be fully embraced? It seems that theology ... at the very least must grant to God the same integrity and recognition of incommensurable difference that it grants to human persons'.⁷⁴⁷

Is Johnson's symbol of God terribly different from that of Irigaray? Both models effectively eliminate the 'other' from any definition of relationality, despite each of them being models of the divine fashioned after women's 'essential' relationality. Johnson and Irigaray actually share a number of similarities in aim and method. Both desire to see women afforded a sense of identity and place that is not sublimated by male-dominated systems, passively or aggressively. Both critique the philosophical systems of which they are a part. On the other hand, both rely on the underlying assumptions of those systems to develop their alternative 'constructions'; i.e., both adopt and make use of a general epistemology, metaphysics and phenomenology of identity. In so doing, however, they rule out the possibility for taking true difference into account.

Both end up making essentialist claims for women's way of being human in the attempt to highlight individual distinction. Both rely on a concept of infinite being as a connecting 'reality'. Both give shape to that concept of 'divine being' from their own concept of women's relationality. Both reject, in Johnson's words, the God of 'classical theism' and with it a realist account of the Triune God made manifest in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. (In Johnson's case, she argues that she does not necessarily reject this God if it is the one revealed in 'salvation experience'. But she generally empties the immanent and economic Trinity of the content of the Scriptural, Church and creedal

⁷⁴⁷ Jones, "This God," 140-41.

traditions of which she is a part and in so doing rejects the exclusive content of the Christian revelation.)

Both rely on God's being as ultimately 'passive' so that God can 'mirror' their own image. In other words, both completely sublimate any sense of God as other, different, free, active and self-determining. In what ends up being simply another kind of 'symmetry', God is limited to women's self-reflection and to their perception of their own 'limitless horizon'. Both believe that the idea of 'God' can and should function as the alternative political, ethical and aesthetic ideal of the emerging female subject.⁷⁴⁸ Where they part company is in their definition of terms. Irigaray calls this 'religion' as idealised ego projection. Johnson calls this alternative Christian Trinitarian theology.

Serene Jones recognises in Irigaray's construction the same dangers that we have suggested in Johnson's relational ontology. In 'fending off hierarchy by dissolving difference', observes Jones, the necessary distinction between God and the world is lost. The difference between human beings then becomes a threat instead of a cause for celebration and community. Because this new 'logic of the same' has the potential to be terribly oppressive, Jones is led to ask:

'[H]ow can Irigaray maintain an ethic of difference in human relations if the normative model of the God-human relation is one in which difference is reduced to a function of the subject and thereby dissolved as true difference? If theology actually carries the high degree of normative cultural power that Irigaray suggests it does, then what are the social consequences of figuring God as a purely aesthetic, ethical and political ideal? The consequences would seem to be the reinscription, at the theological level, of the very idealised "logic of the same" that Irigaray correctly identifies as having repressive social consequences when it serves as the norm for the movement of thought in general.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁸ Jones, "This God," 125.

⁷⁴⁹ Jones, "This God," 139. Despite the vision that may be shared between Barth and feminism, which Jones clearly recognises, she believes they leave us 'caught in a confounding theological tension' with the as-yet-undiscovered answer lying somewhere 'between' them. Jones believes that if there is relational hierarchy rather than unilateral, mutual and reciprocal equality between the two 'terms' or persons of *any* relation, even divine-human, then 'this Godhead will ultimately devour difference by virtue of its privileged position'. What about Jones's repeated use of Barth's description of God throughout her essay – 'the God who loves in freedom'?

Her conclusion is that the consequences are of the same repressive sort that Irigaray initially critiques. In Johnson's use of dominating universals both for women's experience and for God-talk, can she avoid the same consequences?

Ultimately, we are led back to Johnson's statement regarding univocity and 'models' of the Trinity. First, Johnson argues that her Trinitarian discourse will be based on an ontological concept of the God-world relation with radical asymmetry between God and the world. It would appear, however, that ultimately this radical asymmetry is preserved only by (1) Johnson's belief that somehow God remains 'other' within her unified ontological construction that posits a necessary relation between God and the world, and (2) her declaration of God's absolute unknowability as a preamble to her own naming of God. Second, she argues that her discourse will remain free of univocity. What she actually states, however, is that as regards the Trinity, she believes in using 'multiple models, convinced that pushing only one alone inevitably leads to univocity in speech'. Having multiple models is not the way to protect against univocity, however. This is particularly so if the models are generally 'univocal' – that is, if they all derive from women's experience and do not have epistemic access to or 'analogical' content that comes from 'faith-filled' participation in Christ by the Spirit.

Johnson argues that the symbol of God 'functions' to change social and ecclesial structures. And yet, in her critique of the Trinitarian language of the Church's creeds, Johnson states that 'like a drowned continent, it bends all currents of trinitarian thought to the shape of the model used'.⁷⁵⁰ Remarkably, Johnson never addresses the fact that her re-

⁷⁵⁰ *SWI*, 196, 212. Ruether says something similar when claiming that male systems of authority try to 'make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that which is experienced. In reality, the relation is the opposite' (*Sexism and God-talk*, 12).

interpretation of doctrine and her introduction of new religious symbols into the community is *expressly for the purpose* of changing the community's 'experience'. It is precisely in order to make 'received symbols dictate what can be experienced'. She can only make such a statement by assuming traditional Trinitarian God-talk to be instrumentalist rather than revelatory, reflexive and participatory. By suspending the Christian concept of truth and of theological speech as ontological participation in the *koinonia* of the Triune God, she ends up critiquing her own methodology and its dominating effects.

Jones argues that, given Irigaray's interest in preserving the incommensurable otherness of woman, it would seem that she would show a similar respect for difference in her doctrine of God. As the idealised, projected other of women's subjectivity, God's otherness is reduced to a function of the idealised *role* God fills. There is finally no room for alterity – true otherness in terms of personal distinction is utterly eliminated. '[I]t would seem that female desire has consumed God. Caught once again in the old game of symmetry, God is merely the screen necessary for self-knowledge, the mirror that reflects the narcissistic gaze of the subject'.⁷⁵¹ Johnson's God-talk must not play the game of symmetry or she will not only be susceptible of eliminating the distinctions essential to feminism as well as providing a potential source of religious oppression. She will have failed to hold to the essential distinction between God and the world that she knows is necessary in Christian discourse.

If, as Johnson argues with McFague, we really cannot know of whom we speak when we say 'God', then 'it would mean that all theological statements were purely mythological, the arbitrary projection of human images and concepts onto that which

⁷⁵¹ Jones, "This God," 138.

transcends the created order'.⁷⁵² She would fall prey to Pannenberg's worry; ultimately 'we end up presiding over the reality of God in our concepts'.⁷⁵³ If, on the other hand, Johnson's God-talk is to 'fit within the contours of the Christian faith' as ontological language that reflects the experience of the Christian whose relational life really is in God, it must be in continuity with the language of the Church *as epistemic and ontological participation* in the Triune life of God, which is the life of the Church, its faith and its witness.

⁷⁵² Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 128.

⁷⁵³ Having assessed the concept of analogy to be ultimately univocal, Pannenberg (Johnson's other mentor) states, 'Analogy, then, can never become the basic thought-form in Christian theology'. Johnson, "The Right Way to Speak About God," 678-80.

Conclusion

The purpose of the thesis has been to examine and critique the transcendental feminist methodology and 'trinitarian' theology – what we have described as the relational ontology – of Elizabeth Johnson. In chapter one, we set forth her methodology in its specifically modern, Catholic Reformist context in opposition to the 'idolatry' of Christian Trinitarian theism. In chapter two, we analysed her two sets of experiential assumptions – transcendental and feminist – and noted the difficulties she has in sustaining them both. Chapter three analysed and critiqued her 'trinitarian' relational ontology and Christology. This was specifically in relation to Barth's description of Trinitarian theology, Chalcedonian Christology and experience of God conditioned by the Holy Spirit. Finally, in chapter four, we examined her claims for 'analogical' God-talk and compared her symbolic use of language for God to other trends in contemporary theology, feminist and otherwise.

What we have demonstrated in these four chapters is that the foundational, *a priori* principles at work in Johnson's panentheistic, feminist concept of God make it virtually impossible for her to honour the necessary freedom and radical distinction of the Triune God in relation to the world. This includes the divine freedom and distinction inherent in God's Self-revelation and in the Church's 'analogous' language for God *a posteriori*, as it were. In the end, her concept of *She Who Is* significantly changes the form and content of Christian doctrine and language such that it is barely 'recognizable within the contours of Christian faith' as the language of the ontological Body of Christ, if at all.

A. Inherent Conflicts

As Johnson develops her relational ontology, she makes three significant claims. First, in appealing ontologically and methodologically to women's 'experience', she claims to avoid universal 'sameness' among women *and* reverse sexism.⁷⁵⁴ Her second claim is that in her theological discourse, she 'names toward a relational God who loves in freedom', prizing 'a genuine dialectic between God and the world that safeguards difference while preserving connection'.⁷⁵⁵ Finally, arguing from her own, constructed metaphysical system 'about the way things truly are', she claims that her use of multiple Trinitarian models keeps her from 'univocity in speech about the divine'.⁷⁵⁶

In each case, the priority Johnson recognizes to be necessary, both as a feminist and as a Christian theologian, is that of 'distinction', especially as it pertains to women's particularity. As a feminist she must honour human distinction and diversity to avoid the pitfalls of androcentricism, patriarchy and Western imperialism. As a Christian she must honour divine-human distinction; without it she falls into the monistic, 'suffocating deception' of pantheism. Finally, as a Roman Catholic 'Thomist', she must honour divine transcendence and distinction regarding the God-world relation; only this prevents her 'analogical' God-talk from falling into univocity. Without the necessary distinction in the Christian tradition between Creator and creature – and the distinct identity given to both in the Incarnation – feminist God-talk is merely human projectionism. Johnson would end up talking only about herself, or her three-fold 'salvific' experience, or her thrice-named female ideal. Technically, she would also open the field for *anyone* to speak of

⁷⁵⁴ *SWI*, 32.

⁷⁵⁵ *SWI*, 226.

⁷⁵⁶ "Forging Theology," 106. Social theorist Linda Alcoff critiques this feminist approach: 'The bottom line criticism of metaphysics has been that metaphysics defines truth in such a way that it is impossible to attain and then claims to have attained [it]'. "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: the Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, 346.

God out of *his or her* own experience without being able to contest the resulting 'symbol', at least not according to her own methodological principles.

It is our contention that despite Johnson's best efforts – and her laudable compassion for the real suffering of women in history – what happens in the end is just this: She is left with only her self-talk and self-experience, not with Christian theological speech or ontological participation in the Triune God. Her transcendental and feminist principles are neither metaphysically nor logically compatible. They also put her in conflict with the Roman Catholic and feminist communities she represents. Finally, they make it virtually impossible for her to 'safeguard difference while preserving connection' in her own explication of God's relationality and relation to the world, let alone in continuity with the reality of the Church and its language, embedded in and expressing its relational life in God.

As we have argued in the preceding chapters, there are a number of internal inconsistencies in Johnson's approach. The first arise when her seemingly neutral, 'essentialist' assertions come into conflict with her gender-based assertions at what are foundationally ontological and epistemological levels. For instance, on one hand she argues from a 'creative anti-realist' position that language has creative power and that all human beings are ontologically equal, active subjects with the capacity to 'name' their reality. On the other hand, she states that 'male' language 'dominates' and that the way men 'name' reality is 'wrong' (this is feminism's most basic tenet!). All humans are transcendently, existentially open to and experience the divine as an element of their self-experience. However, 'male' experience of God is 'patriarchal'; because men construct the world 'wrongly', their names for God are 'idolatrous'. They are not 'true' to

the relationality that *is* divine reality. Hence, men *do not* in fact have the ability to adequately name God from their own transcendental experience. Either their transcendental experience is in question, or their ontological reality. Johnson talks in terms of men's 'defective' experience. What exactly is she alluding to? If men *as human beings* are ontologically grounded in 'relational being' like women, would they not also experience relationality and image it thusly?

This leads to the second set of internal inconsistencies. Johnson's argument for feminist God-talk – in fact, *any* God-talk from experience – is based on a fundamental agnosticism. As we have seen, she equates divine incomprehensibility with Kantian unknowability so that she is intentionally left with an 'agnosticism of definition' when it comes to God. (This, she posits, is an affirmation of God's 'radical otherness'.) She goes so far as to say that God is 'inapprehensible', i.e., beyond human *awareness*! This is logically impossible for a transcendental philosophy that posits self-awareness as awareness of God. God is also beyond all 'thematizing', and yet Johnson's whole project is to 'name', i.e., 'thematize', the 'Nameless'. If in fact we *can* apprehend but cannot 'know' God because God is absolutely unknowable, then how do we know that it is 'God' that we have apprehended? And how do we know that we have named God 'rightly'? One must finally ask, if at first *all* humans can *directly know* the unknowable, and know that it is *God*, and know that 'God' is *necessarily related* to the world '*like a Trinity*' (and know what a Trinity is like *without God as the antecedent!*), why is it that suddenly *only women* can know and name this God in the '*right way*'?

And yet, if individual human experience is the determining factor in theology, then knowledge of God cannot contradict knowledge gained from one's own

metaphysical reflections about God and the world. This makes it impossible for Johnson to know whether the 'God' another individual – *male or female* – apprehends and experiences is the same 'God' she experiences. It also makes it impossible to judge whether that *male or female* person's apprehension of and symbolization of God is 'right' or 'wrong'. Technically, since God has no objectivity in Johnson's theology, she is making judgments about the symbols such an individual constructs out of his or her own reality – something that Johnson defends her own right to do and sees as a pluralistic, postmodern privilege.

This leads to the question of implausibility. How does Johnson even begin to have dialogue with other women about 'God'? In the postmodern dialogue of self-projected images for the divine, to what are these women referring? The term ceases to have any public meaning by Johnson's own definition of how one 'symbolises' God. One is led to ask how she can write a book arguing for 'the right way to speak about God?' given the sensitivities of feminist pluralism. How too, can she argue for the 'universal claim to Christian truth'? Neither of these kinds of statements is permissible, either by a postmodern feminist standard or an individual transcendental standard. An 'ethical' or 'moral' claim to God's 'identity' is illogical in either a feminist or transcendental context. So too, is the idea of making this kind of claim for God-talk when one is agnostic.

There are also the hosts of *ontological* questions that attach to Johnson's assumptions and beg the question of distinction, both divine and human. Among the many raised in the last two chapters, we simply ask what constitutes the 'en' in Johnson's panentheism so that it is not ultimately pantheism? How can one tell where 'God' begins

and humanity 'ends', as it were, and *vice versa*? What are the implications for human and divine freedom in this ontological relation?

In sum, Johnson's adoption of Rahner's neo-Kantian, Hegelian and Schleiermacherian principles make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for her to hold a 'distinctive', Christian asymmetrical view of God and humanity in divine-human relation. Her relational ontology functions as what Barth calls a *tertium quid*; the universal structure of 'relational being', as a predefined, *a priori* category of human knowing, is more foundational than the Being of God. As such, it prescribes the conditions for the divine-human relation in terms of being and action. By making women's experience the only epistemic condition by which God's 'relational being' can be known, Johnson fails to demonstrate that her concept of God's transcendence and 'radical otherness' corresponds with anything other than the content of women's 'experience' of absolute 'Spirit' or 'Being'. In the end, this category sets the norm for 'full humanity' and gives form and content to the 'right' concept of God, despite Johnson's transcendental claims. Furthermore, by incorporating her feminist principles into her relational ontology she (unwittingly to be sure) finds herself falling into the worst kind of sexism – that of *ontological* inferiority – for which she rightly criticizes her own historical tradition and which she elsewhere tries to avert.

B. 'Beyond' Barth's Critique of Experience?

Robert Jenson has observed that what is often considered to be 'new' and 'radical' in Anglo-American theology is simply a repristination of 'some nineteenth-century German bright idea' – one that generally has not gone through the radical challenges of Barth's thought that sent theological shock waves throughout continental

Europe in the early twentieth-century.⁷⁵⁷ This seems especially to be the case regarding Johnson's Catholic reformism and particularly her 'trinitarian' relational ontology.⁷⁵⁸

In contradistinction to Barth, Johnson states that in today's agnostic, even atheistic climate, 'for the Christian claim to universal truth to be taken seriously, the logical force of the argument for the reality of God must be asserted'.⁷⁵⁹ That 'logical force' is not derived from God himself as the ultimate 'Active Subject', the concrete Reality in light of which all other realities are to be reconceived. God is not a Subject in Johnson's theology. Rather, it is the sphere of human anthropology, specifically women's *individual* experience that reveals the 'Christian claim to universal truth' about 'divine mystery' – the all encompassing yet radically distinct 'other'.⁷⁶⁰

In Johnson's case, this is not the wholly, holy 'Other' who supremely, miraculously becomes one with humanity in the *Logos*, but 'otherness' in its most abstract, agnostic sense. She is determined to go 'beyond' Barth's view of Trinitarian revelation into the more 'accessible' realm of contemporary experience with its agnostic 'openness'.⁷⁶¹ As she develops her panentheistic, 'trinitarian' concepts, she finds Piet Schoonenberg particularly helpful. Schoonenberg affirms that the scholastic doctrine of

⁷⁵⁷ Jenson, "Karl Barth," in *The Modern Theologians* (see n. 28) 34.

⁷⁵⁸ John Webster notes that these nineteenth-century traditions are still authoritative in the liberal Protestant and revisionist Catholic expressions of Western Christian theology. Where they have waned, a more constructive engagement with Christian orthodoxy is gaining momentum, and, states Webster, a recovery of Barth's thought has often been either 'a precipitous cause or a significant consequence'. "Introducing Barth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (see n.11), 11.

⁷⁵⁹ "The Legitimacy of the Question of God," 289-90.

⁷⁶⁰ In a lecture given by John Macquarrie in honour of Rahner's 80th birthday, Macquarrie follows Johnson's line of argument in her essay on Pannenberg. He states that although 'the theme of theology is and must remain God', classical theology's – and specifically Barth's – placement of the doctrine of God at the forefront of theology is neither valid nor appropriate in the current environment. The 'necessary starting point' is the doctrine of humanity. Macquarrie, "The Anthropological Approach to Theology," *Heythrop Journal* XXV (1984): 272-273; Johnson, "The Right Way to Speak About God: Pannenberg on Analogy," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 673-692.

⁷⁶¹ "The Legitimacy of the Question of God," 289-90.

participation and modern forms of panentheism are related.⁷⁶² He too claims to go 'further than Barth', arguing that the question of whether God would be choose to be trinitarian apart from salvation history is purely speculation and impossible to determine on the basis of revelation.⁷⁶³

Johnson thus appeals to the 'logic' of 'inductively' speaking about 'the triune God' starting with the ontological principle/experience of 'Spirit'. This approach 'corresponds with certain broad streams of existential, historical, religious, logical, theological and feminist wisdom' and is 'more intrinsically intelligible to many contemporary minds'.⁷⁶⁴ Barth's 'appeal to the authority of the revealing Word of God' must be left behind, she argues, 'if such speech is not to be dismissed as the arbitrary expression of a pious heart (even the heart of a theologian)'.⁷⁶⁵

Johnson's rejection of Barth on the grounds of 'arbitrary pietism', however, fails precisely to recognise the essence of his critique against 'theological' appeals to experience – that is, that theology is not 'individual' or 'private' in any sense.⁷⁶⁶ Theology is the language of the Church about God, given by God. One can no more be engaged in 'privatised' theological discourse – even as 'personal pietism' – than one can draw the hermeneutical circle starting from oneself and hope to capture God in the process. For Barth, both are logical, and ontological, impossibilities. The great irony is

⁷⁶² *SWI*, 302n18.

⁷⁶³ Schoonenberg states: 'I myself am convinced that the idea of God becoming triune through his salvific self-communication is possible. I can go further than Karl Barth, who refers God's Trinity to a decision of God which, however, is a "primordial decision"... I can see God becoming triune by a *historical* decision of himself. This is what we know about God's Trinity' (*The Christ*, 86n16(c), (emphasis added)). LaCugna defends Schoonenberg for this assertion (See *God For Us*, 238n33), while Walter Kasper criticises him for it (*The God of Jesus Christ* [New York: Crossroad, 1984], 275).

⁷⁶⁴ *SWI*, 123.

⁷⁶⁵ "The Legitimacy of the Question of God," 289-90.

⁷⁶⁶ Barth considered even Pietism (though well intentioned) to look elsewhere than to the Word of God to measure truth. *C.D.* 1.1, 250-51.

that Johnson would criticise *anyone* on these grounds, for this is precisely her Catholic reformist approach: In Linda Woodheads terms, it is an individualistic form of modern spirituality which purports to have 'privatised' Christian God-talk.⁷⁶⁷

C. Theology as the Language of the Church in Trinitarian Participation

Barth could not be more specific in the opening pages of the *Church Dogmatics* – that by its very nature it is *Church* dogmatics. Theology is a function of the *Church* and dogmatics 'is the self-examination of the Christian Church in respect of the content of its distinctive talk about God'.⁷⁶⁸ As talk about God, theology stands under the Church's judgment and 'lives by the promise given to the Church'.⁷⁶⁹ Why? Because the Church speaks out of its own ontological existence and identity, individually and corporately, given in Christ. As God personally encounters, addresses and speaks his reconciling Word to humanity in the revelation of Jesus Christ – from his virgin birth to his exaltation at the right hand of the Father and outpouring of the Spirit – the Church is given its own being and joined to the fellowship of the Triune God.

Johnson's experiential approach, on the other hand, is a profoundly non-ecumenical. In her theology, the pressure of interpretation comes from her view of 'women's experience', both as a 'universal' and individual concept imposed upon those in and outside the Church. Hence she fails to account for the experience of the Church as truly 'catholic' and truly diverse – both aspects of which derive from its being in the Triune God.

⁷⁶⁷ Woodhead, "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 198. Thus, says Woodhead, Johnson replaces 'church and sacraments with an imagined global community and the importance of prayer, worship and formation by tradition is simply ignored' (205).

⁷⁶⁸ C.D. 1.1, 11.

⁷⁶⁹ C.D. 1.1, 3.

Theologically, the Church as the Body of Christ assesses its language from the criterion of its Head, Jesus Christ, whose Spirit continues to bear witness to this Word alone. The Church discerns the Word as from the Holy Spirit and not the 'spirits' of the age through the testimony of Scripture and the confessional witness of its creeds.⁷⁷⁰ It is for this reason, says Paul Hinlicky, that 'the canonical biblical narrative and the eschatological community of the *ecclesia* imply one another': 'This same Spirit [that was in Jesus Christ] is bestowed on his community, not, of course, like some impersonal fluid mechanically injected into the ecclesiastical machinery but rather as the final Person, whose self-impartation consists in calling believers forward "to the glorious liberty of the children of God."' The transcendence of God to which believers infinitely advance is designated this way, not as something beyond or behind the triune God's life but within this very life of the Spirit, the Son and the Father'.⁷⁷¹

This, states Linda Woodhead, is just what feminist theologians like Johnson fail to understand. By reducing Christianity 'to the thin reality of a set of dogmas standing over against the individual',

[feminist theology] ignores the discourses of Christianity itself. It occludes the thick reality of the Trinitarian God and of those communities which are caught up in His life. In the language which is so privileged in the church's self-understanding, the church is the 'body of Christ'. This language shows clearly that the believer, the church and its teachings are not separate objects. The church is not an institution which threatens the autonomy of the individual but the community in which human beings are formed and shaped as faithful and loving creatures.⁷⁷²

Thus the Church, as this community of human beings, speaks its own reality as the new creation in the process of proclaiming the truth about God's love for creation in the Incarnation. Theological speech, when it is understood in the context of the revelation

⁷⁷⁰ 'The Church', says Barth, 'is the one particular spot which corresponds to the particularity of the incarnation. It is there that revelation is really subjective, for there Jesus Christ the Head has His own people His body, there the only-begotten Son of God has in them His brethren'. *C.D.* I.2, 247.

⁷⁷¹ Paul Hinlicky, "Secular & Eschatological Conceptions of Salvation," in *This is My Name Forever*, 228.

⁷⁷² Woodhead, "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 195.

of God's Triune Personhood, is speech about personhood and humanity in the image of the God. Through epistemic participation in Christ, human identity must be reconsidered not just in terms of gender with its positive understanding of Gen 1:27. i.e., of human beings together constituted as male and female in relationship, but christologically and trinitarianly as the 'new humanity' through the new human, Jesus Christ.

What it demands of us and itself creates in us is obedience: an obedient hearing and speaking on the part of the Church that is triune in structure out of its *koinonia* in the Triune God. Because God is made known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this is the Church's only answer to the question "Who is the God in whom we believe?" And the 'who' question precedes any kind of 'what' question by the very the nature of God's Self-giving revelation.

It is in this light that what Barth says about the *vestigia trinitatis* makes sense. The doctrine of the Trinity is given to the Church in both the form and the content of the divine Word that is spoken in its midst and that it is in turn commanded to speak. As reflection on what God has spoken, this rules out as valid options either agnosticism or the categorical substitution of religious constructs. To allow the term 'God' to be defined differently for the sake of some apologetic argument or in pursuit of some common denominator of shared understanding, is simply to capitulate once again to the very idolatry from which revelation seeks to deliver us. Furthermore, because the doctrine of the Trinity is also God's *reconciling Word for us*, 'Trinity', 'Incarnation', 'salvation', or '*imago Dei*' are not 'words' or categories based on some alleged ethical or experiential 'common ground' abstracted from the gospel. Ironically, Barth believed that if in fact God is in revelation what he is in himself, then any attempt to say otherwise, particularly

on the basis of agnosticism, would be to succumb to subjectivism, dualism, pantheism, or, worst of all, *panentheism*!⁷⁷³

D. The Church's Life and Language Grounded 'In Christ'

God-talk is not a matter of continuous agnostic or equivocal disclaimers which, while devoid of shared meaning, rest on the hope that we really are speaking of God (or as Johnson also puts it in the language of encounter, that 'God comes to meet us') in our attempts to describe 'divine mystery'. Neither is it a matter of univocal, Feuerbachian reduction, where theological statements are merely anthropological ones limited to the confines of human capacity. Whereas Johnson attempts to 'throw a hermeneutical span' for women to cross back and forth between the Christian and feminist views of God and humanity, Barth contends that only God can and does span the gap between himself and his creation in his personal Word. Only this Word of truth can both call forth and enable an adequate, meaningful and still indirect analogical response from the side of and within creation.

Our terms refer to God in and through their being grounded in the *Logos*, just as the incarnate Logos constitutes the community of the Church. Our participation in the Body of Christ is *koinonia* (and not, emphasises Alan Torrance, the Platonic methexis [participation]). It takes place by the Spirit in Christ, encountering human beings again through the Holy Spirit who conditions their experience to receive this *Logos* as God's own Self-Revelation.

Torrance reminds us that Athanasius first highlighted the difference between anthropomorphic projection of our opinions (*epinoiai*) onto the divine (what he termed mythologizing) – and *theologeîn* or *analogeîn*. In *theologeîn* (God-talk proper), our

⁷⁷³ C.D. II.1, 312.

terms are extended to project (*ana-logein*) beyond their ordinary context of use in such a way that they refer to the reality of God. These terms cease to be mere *epinoiai* (arbitrary human opinions or ideas projected mythologically on the transcendent) and become *dianoiai* – concepts that project through (*dia*) to the reality and being of God. They are, says Eberhard Jüngel, ‘commandeered’ by God in his own reality. The condition of this is *meta-noia*, as Paul interpreted it – that is, the transformation of our thinking and concepts (*noiai*) and thus our terminology. The implication is that there is a semantic shifting of our concepts in parallel with the “reschematization” of our minds (Rom. 12:2) so that they might truly and appropriately refer to the divine. In sum, *theologein* – that is, valid or truthful reference to God – requires a reconciliation of our hostile, alienated *noiai* so that we might have that mind which is in Christ Jesus. We thereby participate in the new, transformed semantics (or “language games”) of the Body of Christ – where our *logoi* participate in the *Logos*, who is God concretely present within the created order.⁷⁷⁴

Thus, we are enabled to hear God’s Word by the Spirit, and to refer to God to the extent that our concepts of God are reschematized by the one who took the form of a servant, commandeering not only our language but radically commandeering our understanding of love, power, sacrifice, freedom and relation as true to the very Being of God in Christ.⁷⁷⁵ God commandeers the term ‘Father’ by revealing himself as the Father of Jesus Christ and of those who encounter his Son and follow him by their Spirit. In

⁷⁷⁴ “Is Love the Essence of God?” in *Nothing Greater Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 114-137, 123-124. ‘The ontological ground of *analogein* and *theologein* is not some universal, ontological likeness (i.e., a *homoi-ousia*!) between cause and effect – so absolute and universal that it includes God. Rather, it is the oneness of being of the Son and the Spirit with God the Father. The *homoousion* becomes, in other words, the *sine qua non* of the analogical functioning of our terms where, by the Creator Spirit, our minds and our conceptualities are reconciled and united with Christ as the One in whom we have the fullness of the Being of God with us’ (136). See also T. F. Torrance’s discussion of Athanasius in *Theology and Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965) and *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965).

⁷⁷⁵ “Is Love the Essence of God,” 124-5.

Jesus Christ, God redefines being 'for the other' *not* on the basis of 'mutual equality', but rather by not considering ontological 'equality' with God something to be grasped, taking the form of a sacrificial servant for the sake of the 'other'. In him, freedom and power are inseparable from mercy, grace and love, and vice versa.

Because Johnson does not have an adequately Chalcedonian Christology, however, Jesus Christ is not 'God' for women this way. Ultimately, without the *homoousion* – such that in Jesus Christ *God* is truly for us – Johnson is also without the centre of Christian doctrine and without a Trinitarian theology. Inadvertently, she ends up *with* a potentially oppressive religious ideology.

E. Inadequate Christology

Christianity attempts to hold in highest regard the reality of personal uniqueness and difference between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves, based on the relational freedom given in and by God as Creator. Nowhere is this more dramatically realised than in the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God is not only Lord of creation but part of it by his own free action and being.

In Johnson's ontological and theological concepts there is a confusion and reversal of the Creator-creature relation based on the following: (1) beginning theology with experiences of self-transcendence, (2) failing to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit, (3) making God in some sense dependent upon and indistinguishable from history; and (4) a lack of precision in Christology.⁷⁷⁶ This final element affects all the others.

⁷⁷⁶ Molnar describes these trends in "Toward a Contemporary Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and the Present Discussion," *SJT* 49 (1996): 312.

Johnson does take Jesus' humanity with utmost seriousness – a positive contribution to Christology. It is precisely this important point that she stresses by recognising the Nicene affirmation that Jesus '*homo factus est*'. If the stress was on '*vir factus est*' stressing male sexuality, then 'What is not assumed is not redeemed, but what is assumed is saved by union with God' leaves the female half of the human race unredeemably outside of God's salvation.⁷⁷⁷ What Johnson does not take seriously is sin as a human condition and thus the need for redemption *by God in Jesus Christ*. Thus, she fails to take seriously the *homoousion* – that 'what is assumed is saved *by union with God*'. In Hunsinger's terms, the *person* and *work* of Johnson's Christology do not correspond with that of Chalcedon, and if she changes one, she changes the other. The result is that Johnson does not leave half but the whole human race 'outside of God's salvation'.

Without holding a view of both a divine and human nature in Jesus Christ, it is impossible to affirm the claims of the Christian faith regarding God, humanity and the salvific content of the divine-human relation. Without a Chalcedonian Christology that takes the *homoousion* seriously, there is no criteria by which to speak of God as triune. Only if Jesus is divine does she have access within human experience to *God* among us, revealing the relationality of God, the love of God, the sacrificial, reconciling action and being of God for us. Furthermore, Johnson's trinitarian assumptions blur the God-world distinction by collapsing the immanent and economic Trinity and making God utterly dependent on creation for the expression of his own Being and action.

As a Catholic reformist, Johnson is committed to theology as 'corrective', emancipatory praxis. Her prime directive is to reinterpret and systematically 'reform'

⁷⁷⁷ Johnson, "Redeeming the Name," 119. The axiom attributes to Gregory of Nazianzus.

Christianity as a socio-religious conceptual and linguistic system, 'reshaping' the 'symbols' of the Christian faith with a feminist agenda. The assumption is that the form and content of Christian theology can be separated and 'reformed' according to criteria external to the tradition itself. By assuming that the 'Trinity' is a concept in abstraction from God's own Triune Being, she changes both *the essential* form and the content of Christian theology according to the *a priori* of women's experience.

She describes this endeavour as 'braiding a footbridge between the ledges of classical and feminist wisdom'.⁷⁷⁸ Although her metaphor implies that these ledges hold equal weight and influence, clearly 'feminist wisdom' – which incorporates liberation feminist ethics, contemporary theology and modern methodology – far outweighs 'classical wisdom'. Ironically, Johnson argues *from* classical tradition that her theology and method is orthodox while simultaneously debunking tradition as the source of sexism and *idolatry* (the Father, Son and Spirit in Triune aseity). Hence she rejects Barth and his regard for God's wholly and holy 'otherness' based on Scripture and its witness to Jesus Christ as *Immanuel*.

Barth, on the other hand, is uncompromising:

The Christian religion is the predicate to the subject of the name of Jesus Christ. Without Him it is not merely something different. It is nothing at all ... Because it was and is and shall be through the name of Jesus Christ, it was and is and shall be the true religion: the knowledge of God, and the worship of God, and the service of God, in which man is not alone in defiance of God but walks before God in peace with God. ... The Christian religion is simply the earthly-historical life of the Church and the children of God.⁷⁷⁹

Ironically, the criticisms against Catholic reformism that most closely resemble those of conservative Christian orthodoxy come from post-Christian feminists like Daphne Hampson. Sounding very much like Barth, Hampson states that to change the

⁷⁷⁸ *SWI*, 12.

⁷⁷⁹ *C.D.* I.2, 347-8.

basic tenets of the faith, particularly in regard to the Incarnation and thus the Trinity, is to no longer to have to do with Christianity. Criticising Ruether's 'Christian feminist' in particular, Hampson argues that if 'reformism' involves changing meaning as well as praxis, then it ceases to maintain continuity with historical tradition. Since Christianity is historical, as is Jesus' particular divine-human reality, 'to be a Christian is not simply to preach Jesus' message [as a moral vision]. It is also to proclaim a message about Jesus – and therein for a feminist lie all the problems'.⁷⁸⁰ Hampson's general criticism of the relational theology of Johnson's colleagues (Ruether, Keller, Daly, Fiorenza and McFague) is 'how profoundly secular it is. It is as though [modern] theology has lost its moorings. In the case of feminist theology, what seems to have replaced talk of God is largely talk of women's experience. ... In all this, what I miss is 'theology': talk of God'.⁷⁸¹

F. The Oppressive Potential of Experiential God-Talk

At issue in part is whether Johnson really does go 'beyond Barth' by addressing his critique of human experience as an *a priori* for Christian theology and sufficiently resolving the issues he raises in an approach like hers. Does she make a case for an experiential feminist theology that maintains an understanding of divine transcendence and immanence – and with it, divine and human distinction and freedom – framed by the reality of Jesus Christ? Is her theology non-individualistic, non-dominating and doctrinally orthodox? These issues should belong to any serious feminist theological debate. As Trevor Hart has suggested:

⁷⁸⁰ *Theology and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990), 65. Francis Martin notes that 'Daphne Hampson correctly sees that the Christian claim is realist, and she rejects it. ... Ruether wrongly considers all the language of Christianity to be "instrumentalist," and she proposes adapting it to a "redemptive future," which, rather than past events, "is ultimately normative."' *TFQ*, 179.

⁷⁸¹ *Theology and Feminism*, 170.

The loss of any genuine sense of transcendence (and thus of a proper understanding of immanence) in much contemporary theology suggests that the problems which Barth faced are just as live at the end of the twentieth [and the beginning of the twenty-first] century as they were at its outset, and that the emphases which he adopted and the categories upon which he drew in facing these problems may well be worthy of further careful consideration.⁷⁸²

Though Johnson wants to talk of God, even to speak 'the right way' about God, her agnosticism would no doubt leave Hampson in the same position – 'missing theology'. Because God is posited as pure Spirit rather than given in the Incarnation, this is not surprising. What would be surprising, says Linda Woodhead, even unthinkable, would be 'that such a *God* could ever address us, surprise us, shake us up, condemn us, forgive us, transform our lives, love us, redeem the world, and raise to new life our embodied reality. Rather God merely becomes a symbol of our highest aspirations, and a motivation for us to realise our true potential'.⁷⁸³

And yet these are Johnson's best hopes for her model of God. *SHE WHO IS* or 'Sophia-God', she says, is theologically legitimate and existentially, religiously necessary for the Christian faith 'if speech about God is to shake off the shackles of idolatry and be a blessing for women' – 'idolatry' being understood as the Church's doctrine of and language for the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁷⁸⁴ Her belief is that if we 'create reality', i.e., 'God' in our image, the result will be the eschatological transformation of all human beings into 'a liberating community of all women and men characterized by mutuality with each other and harmony with the earth'.⁷⁸⁵ It will give

⁷⁸² "Was God in Christ?" in *Regarding Karl Barth*, 27. In his Gifford Lectures, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation* (Aberdeen, 1937 and 1938), Barth himself stated that when natural theology loses its adversary it becomes 'arid and listless'. Thus, Barth gives the natural feminist theologian a position against which to sharpen her thought; furthermore, she cannot avoid his views which are 'the direct opposite of [her] own tenets and therefore of necessity extraordinarily interesting and profitable for [her] own particular undertaking'. Cited by Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 143n6.

⁷⁸³ "Spiritualizing the Sacred," 205.

⁷⁸⁴ *SWI*, 243.

⁷⁸⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 31.

power and dignity to the oppressed, who, given the chance, will execute justice fairly (despite history's record of the oppressed often being the worst oppressors). It will be the 'role-model' (Garrett Green's term) after which we fashion our view of the world and force everyone to conform. This is the foundation for religious ideology – the most oppressive weapon in history.

Scripture and history tell us, however, that God made us in his image and in our fallenness we have forever been trying to return the compliment. We continue to re-enact the original idolatry that defines human sinfulness by assuming that we know God apart from his own *self*-revelation, i.e., that we the creatures know *more* than our Creator. Garrett Green observes that the original temptation in the Genesis narrative was the human urge to model oneself after God: "You will be like God, said the serpent" (Gen 3:5). As Green aptly states:

One of the deepest ironies of the creation story is that the very human creature who has just been formed in the divine image (Gen 1:26-7) succumbs to the temptation to become "like God"! Evidently there is more than one way to be like God, and everything hangs on recognizing the difference. The crucial principle is that the logic of the *imago Dei* is not reversible. When God fashions us after his image, it is called creation; when we fashion God after our image, it is called idolatry. It is precisely this distinction that role-model [Catholic feminist] theology misunderstands.⁷⁸⁶

Johnson's Sophia-God does not go beyond Barth, or even leave him behind. Rather, she 'retro-fits' her theology by going 'behind' him. In a manner reminiscent of Schleiermacher, she can make no profession of God as such but appeals only to her 'gendered' experience of God; thus, her Trinitarian symbol functions no more effectively than Schleiermacher's 'appendix' in terms of its Christian form and content. She also goes around Barth by failing to engage with and account for the criticisms that he raised. In short, she ignores him, as well as those voices in and outside her tradition who are

⁷⁸⁶ "The Gender of God," 54-55.

critical of her totalising approach – which, apart from its lack of orthodoxy, is particularly unfortunate in light of the century of human oppression that has just passed. Without both the proper warrant and critical controls upon God-talk that come from within the reconciled Body of Christ,⁷⁸⁷ God-talk becomes an inconceivably dangerous activity. Johnson has not succeeded in generating sufficient clarity as to how one conceives its warrant, and thus (1) how such God-talk is viable for the Church or (2) how following her method, one would avoid falling prey to such tremendous dangers.

As Barth placed himself in active resistance to forms of injustice throughout his career, it was in light of God's self-revelation and determination of humanity in Jesus Christ. Barth was utterly convinced that the 'grace and nature' or 'gospel and ...' approach of natural theology compromised the faithfulness of the gospel into a false synthesis of, in his case, *Kulterprotestantismus*. For Barth, the same modern philosophical presuppositions at work in Catholic reformism were partially responsible for the economic oppression of uncontrolled capitalism, oppressive German imperialism and finally, the attempted annihilation of the Jews in a drive toward world domination based on ontological superiority!⁷⁸⁸

Theologically, they compromise the essential aspect of God's being and action in and for the world – his absolute freedom. As George Hunsinger explains in light of

⁷⁸⁷ This is what Alvin Plantinga calls the appropriate 'cognitive environment' necessary for truth claims to have warrant. This is *always* a social, communal environment. Ecclesiologically, this implies that there is neither private knowledge of nor private language or reference for God. It always takes place within and as a function of the reconciled community of the Church. See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). I am indebted to Alan Torrance for this discussion.

⁷⁸⁸ In his *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth dialectically challenged liberal theology's attempt to somehow make a direct link between the gospel and the "Declaration of German Intellectuals." This document, signed by such theological giants Herrmann and von Harnack (Barth's teachers), called for loyalty above all to Kaiser Wilhelm II and to the German nation at the outset of World War I. Later Barth vehemently refuted the kinds of syncretistic statements issued in 1933 by certain national church leaders in line with National Socialism. For a concise discussion, see Hart, "The Capacity for Ambiguity," 146-147.

Barth's involvement in drafting the Barmen Confession in opposition to *Kulterprotestantismus* – the 'reforming' of the gospel through its marriage to cultural ideology: 'No other voice apart from the one, necessary and sufficient voice of Jesus Christ, as conveyed to us by the witness of Scripture, or nor any voice alongside the authentic, scriptural voice of Jesus Christ may become the authority for what the church proclaims and teaches'.⁷⁸⁹ This is Barmen's rejection of natural theology in the form of culture-religion. As Barth emphasises, where Jesus Christ "no longer speaks the first and last word, but only at best an additional word", the inevitable result will be "assimilated and domesticated theology."⁷⁹⁰ Lordship is eliminated and humanity as covenant partners and respondents is eliminated.

Such domesticated theology may emerge in apparently agreeable and sophisticated forms, but once allowed in principle, it relativises Christ's voice so that it is no longer understood as necessary, sufficient, and supreme. This relativizing is fatal partly because it undercuts any decisive defence against culture-religion in its more tribal and barbarous forms. The logic of one admits the logic of the other. The Christ of natural theology is always openly or secretly the relativized Christ of culture. The trajectory of natural theology leads from the Christ who is not supreme to the Christ who is not sufficient and finally to the Christ who is not necessary. Culture-religion, relativization, and domestication or assimilation indicate that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is no longer believed or understood.⁷⁹¹

Ultimately, God can use whatever he chooses to speak outside the church – things beautiful or otherwise. None of these things, however, can have epistemological symmetry with the Word, nor independent revelatory or epistemological status. They must line up with what the one voice – the Word – is attesting to in Scripture to know if it is God speaking through them.⁷⁹²

We can only know what we know because of whom we know – God – and this knowledge is given in his own self-disclosure and our received gift of *metanoia*. In other

⁷⁸⁹ Hunsinger, "Barth, Barmen, and the Confessing Church Today," in *Disruptive Grace*, 80.

⁷⁹⁰ C.D. II.1, 163.

⁷⁹¹ Hunsinger, "Barth, Barmen, and the Confessing Church Today," 80.

⁷⁹² Hunsinger, "Barth, Barmen," 82.

words, knowing God as Triune is because of a living encounter between two subjects, divine and human, but only one Subject, God has the ability to establish the encounter. In our sinfulness we simply cannot, says Barth, draw the hermeneutical circle from below and hope to catch God within it. We are utterly dependent on God to establish the conditions for encountering him within our experience by his own gracious Spirit. The Spirit, who alone knows the mind of Christ, is given to those who are in Christ as a 'deposit' guaranteeing their final, glorious consummation as the new creation in communion with the Triune God. This, says Barth, is the mystery of God's 'Sophia':

In I Cor. 2 cf. we are told that the wisdom of God in Christ is a σοφία ἐν μυστηρίῳ unknown to the rulers of this world, not seen by any eye, not heard by any ear, having entered into no man's heart, accessible only to the πνεῦμα of God Himself. It is not, then, accessible to the φυσικὸς ἄνθρωπος who as such does not have the πνεῦμα and who cannot know what is accessible only to the πνεῦμα and through the πνεῦμα: οὐ δεχεται γινῶναι. Man must receive (λαμβάνειν) not only the Word from Christ but also the πνεῦμα by which it is known, or he will not know it at all.⁷⁹³

⁷⁹³ C.D. I.1, 195.

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